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Vol. 72, No. 3—March, 1950 A THRILLING PUBLICATION TWENTY-FOURTH YEAR

COMPLETE NOVEL

THE BUCKSKIN LEGION

By Harry C. Rubicam, Jr.

While Cheyenne Chief Roman Nose battles to halt the Horse of Iron, trapper Joe Cameron plays a valiant role in the tense struggle for progress — and power — on the Frontier! **11**

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Another in our series of special features on Western game and guns

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Fifty Years of Progress

As I watched the great rodeo at Madison Square Garden and saw the contestants ride one bucking horse after another in quick and rapid fire order, I was reminded of the progress that the sport has made in fifty years. Half a century ago they had no chutes in which to saddle bucking horses. All horses were snubbed in the arena, or eared down, and sometimes it would take as long to saddle one bucking horse as it now takes to saddle and ride a dozen of them.

Fifty years ago it would have taken about twelve full hours to run off a show with as many events as is generally run off in two and a half hours now. It's modern equipment, system and showmanship that have speeded up rodeo performances, and the speed has had a lot to do with rodeo popularity.

JE Ranch Rodeo

The final winners in bareback bronc riding at the JE Ranch Rodeo, which was staged in the Farm Show Arena in Harrisburg, Pa., and which was the closing stand of the past season for the JE, were: first, Paul Gould; second, Chuck Dent; third, Speck McLaughlin, and fourth, Joel Sublett.

Johnny Cobb won the saddle bronc riding, Bill Hancock was second, G. K. Lewallen was third and Orville Stanton was fourth.

Jim Eskew, Jr., copped the calf roping, John Pogue was second, Cotton Rosser was third and Claude Damron was fourth. Lee Roberts was best man in the steer wrestling, Jack Kennedy was second, Todd Whatley was third and Jiggs Burk fourth. Freckles Brown and H. Dalton tied for first place in the bull riding, Todd Whatley was third and Bobby Booth was fourth.

The Puyallup Fair

The Puyallup, Washington, Fair and Rodeo was a great show. The rodeo stock was furnished by Christensen Bros. Cy Taillon and George Prescott were the announcers and Wilbur Plougher and Bill Markley the clowns.

There were so many entries that each contestant only got five calves in the calf roping during the eighteen performances and the roping was close as shown by the average, or total time of the winning ropers. Eddie Schell, who won the finals in the event, roped and tied his five calves in 79.1 seconds. Dan Poore, was second with 81.2 seconds, Joe Stenson was third with

(Continued on page 8)

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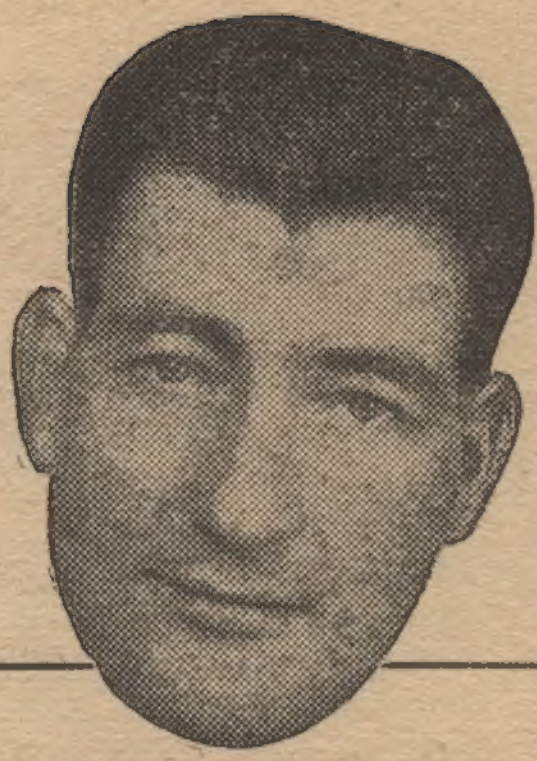

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THE CHUCK WAGON

(Continued from page 6)

81.7 seconds, and Claude Hensen was fourth with 81.9 seconds.

The steer wrestling was not so close. Claude Hensen won this event throwing his five steers in 49.7 seconds, Lawson Fore was second with 87.7 seconds, Del Haverty was third with 102 seconds, and Ike Fernandez was fourth with 122.5 seconds.

Gene Pruett won the saddle bronc riding, Bun Anderson the bareback bronc riding and Lendon Little the bull riding.

It is reported that Roy Rogers will go to England for the making of a series of movies, but before he leaves will be guest star of the Houston Fat Stock Show and Rodeo in Houston, Texas, in February.

Diamond Bar 6 Show

The winners of the Diamond Bar 6 Ranch Rodeo at Miles City, Montana, in steer roping, were: first, Glenn Monte; second, Robert Mitchell; third, Ray Baker; fourth, Jim Laycock.

Victor Small won the steer wrestling, Dean Copping was second, Grant Gatlin was third and Harold Wright was fourth. Jim Laycock copped the calf roping, Jim Reynolds was second, Victor Small was third and Eddie Small fourth. Bill Miller and Jim Griffin tied for first place in the wild cow milking, Vernon Wilson was third and Wayne Reid fourth.

Vernon Wilson was best man in the bareback riding, Clarence Smith was second, while thirteen contestants were tied up for third and fourth places. Grant Gatlin was tops in the saddle bronc riding, and Harold Wright was second, with Tex Taylor and Claude Oster splitting third and fourth.

Sheriff's Posse Rodeo

The Quay County Sheriff's Posse Rodeo, at Tucumcari, New Mexico, was a swell show. Gone were the familiar faces of the Tucumcari Rodeo of thirty years ago, which was then called the Cowboys' Roundup. Such men as Alec Street, Bright Bagley, Walt Naylor and Tex Austin were key men in the production of the show at that time, but as time marches on so does rodeo.

The judges were Bill Myers and Buck Dowell, timers Blanche Beutler and Efith

(Continued on page 120)

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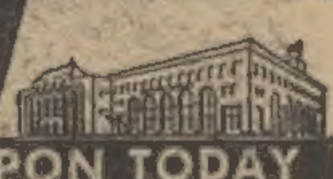

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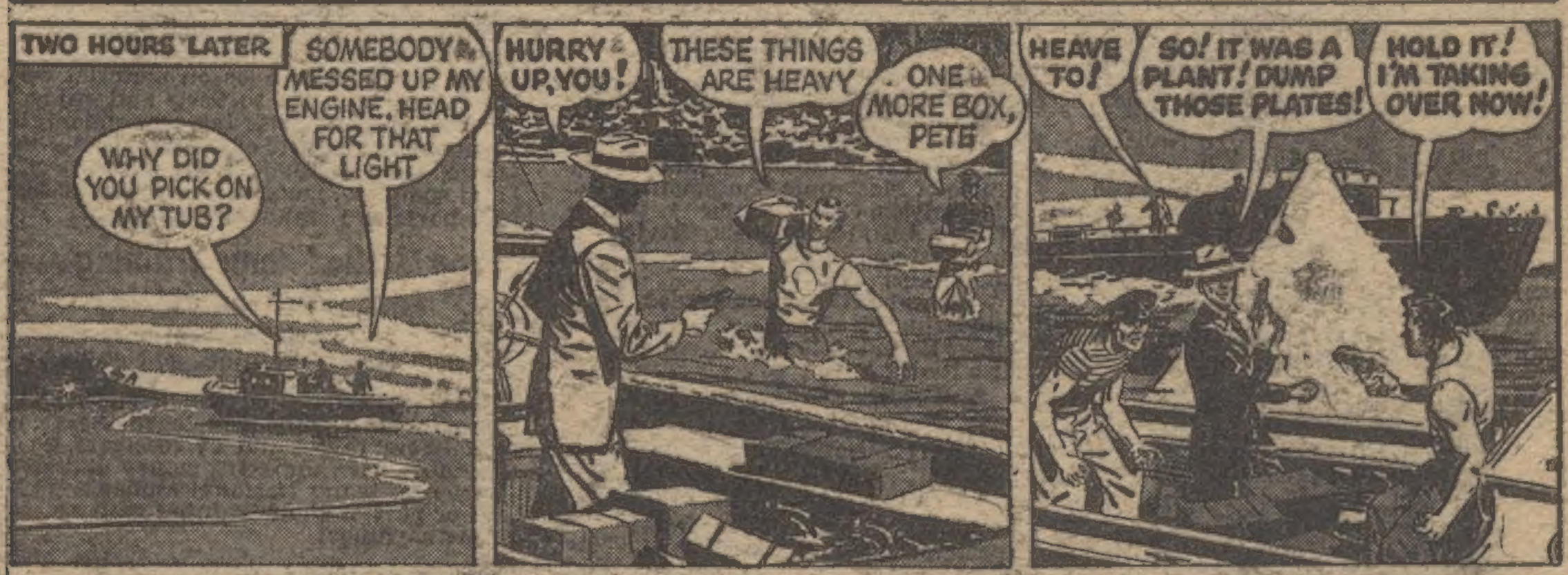
AND THEN JEFF SPRUNG THE TRAP...

TIED UP TO A LONELY DOCK IN A SMALL SOUTHERN BAY, JEFF BELL, "TROPICAL TRAMP," IS SPENDING A QUIET EVENING ABOARD HIS BATTERED LAUNCH, WHEN...

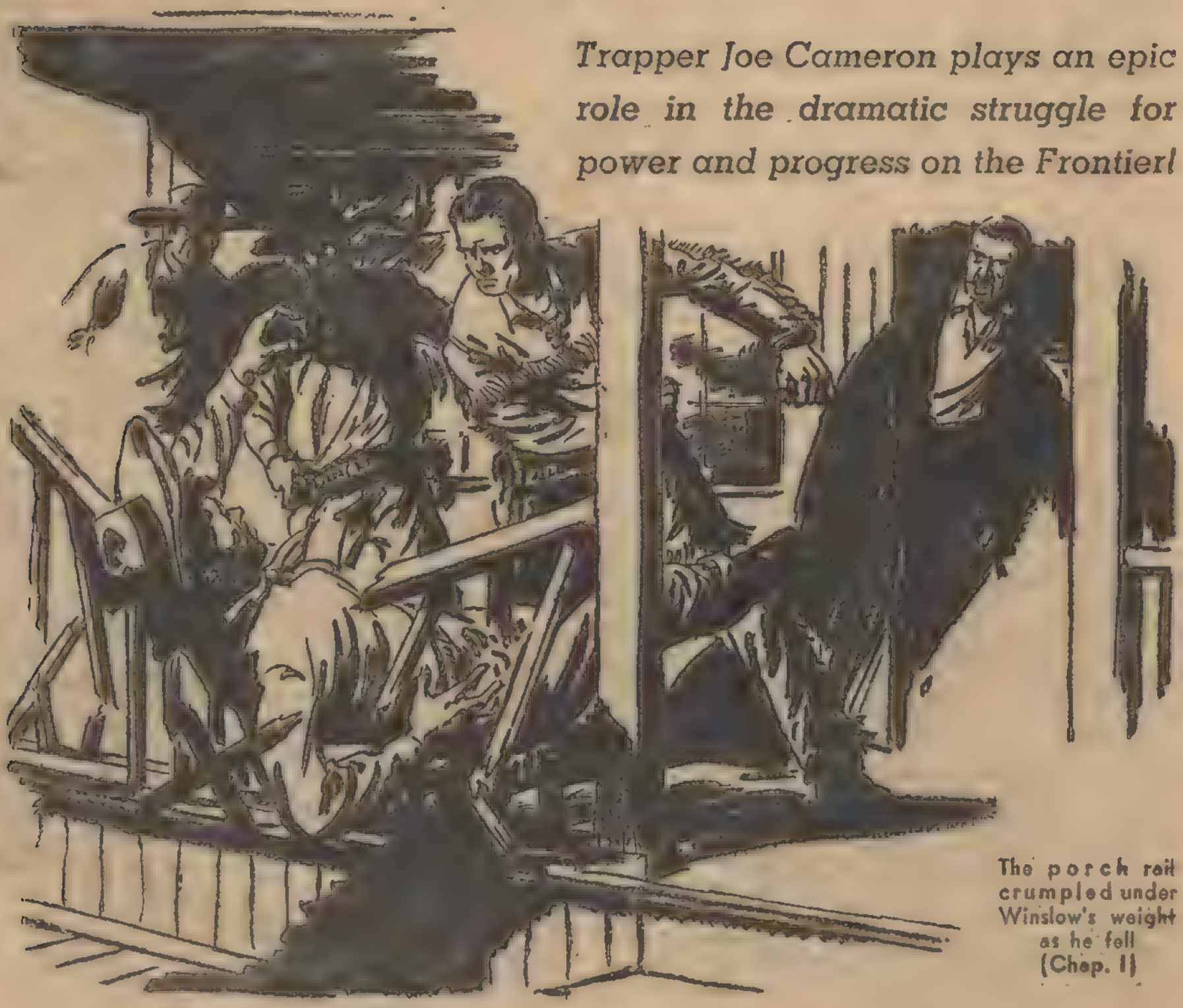

TWO HOURS LATER
WHY DID YOU PICK ON MY TUB?
SOMEBODY MESSED UP MY ENGINE. HEAD FOR THAT LIGHT
HURRY UP, YOU!
THESE THINGS ARE HEAVY
ONE MORE BOX, PETE
HEAVE TO!
SO! IT WAS A PLANT! DUMP THOSE PLATES!
HOLD IT! I'M TAKING OVER NOW!

LATER
TRAP WORKED. COUNTERFEITERS LED ME TO CACHE. BOTH CAPTURED, ALONG WITH PLATES. BELL
I'LL BE GLAD TO SHED THIS BEACHCOMBER RIG. CAN I CLEAN UP HERE?
HERE'S MY RAZOR AND SOME SHORE CLOTHES
WONDERFUL BLADE YOU'VE GOT HERE!! CAN'T RECALL A SMOOTHER, EASIER SHAVE!
THIN GILLETTES GO OVER BIG ON THIS SHIP. THEY'RE PLENTY KEEN

WHO'S THE GOOD-LOOKING CIVILIAN?
JEFF BELL, CLEVEREST AGENT IN THE SERVICE. I HEAR HE'S IN LINE FOR THE CHIEF'S JOB
FOR QUICK, CLEAN, GOOD-LOOKING SHAVES... AND MORE OF 'EM PER BLADE ...USE THIN GILLETTES. THESE BLADES ARE BY FAR THE KEENEST AND LONGEST-LASTING IN ALL THE LOW-PRICED FIELD. PRECISION MADE TO FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR EXACTLY, THIN GILLETTES PROTECT YOUR FACE AGAINST NICKS AND IRRITATION. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES IN THE ECONOMICAL 10-BLADE PACKAGE
THIN Gillette 10 BLADES
10-25¢
4-10¢
NEW TEN-BLADE PACKAGE HAS COMPARTMENT FOR USED BLADES

the BUCKSKIN LEGION

Trapper Joe Cameron plays an epic role in the dramatic struggle for power and progress on the Frontier!



The porch rail crumpled under Winslow's weight as he fell (Chap. I)

a novel by HARRY C. RUBICAM, JR.

CHAPTER I

A Gunfight in Town

JOE CAMERON had lived so long among the Indians that everything in the white man's town seemed strange and hostile.

As his beaded moccasins padded softly along Larimer Street in Denver City, he sensed the enmity of those who passed him on the wooden sidewalk. He had not realized until today that he was regarded as a renegade and a squawman. Actually, he was neither, and he resented the epithets that had been muttered behind his back. But since no open challenge had been flung, he had chosen to ignore the muttering.

Now a slow anger was mounting

within him. He half hoped that someone would insult him and start a fight.

He hadn't long to wait, for as he turned off the sidewalk and stepped onto the railed porch of Jim Beckworth's general store, he was accosted by Buck Winslow, a hard-faced rider who had been one of Hungate's hunters. Behind Winslow slouched two dirty, unshaved men whom Cameron recognized as Squawman Delaney and Bugle McDowell.

"Hello, Cameron!" Winslow said, sneeringly. "How's your friend, Roman Nose?"

"He was all right last time I saw him," Cameron replied, evenly.

"When was that?" Winslow asked. "At the Hungate massacre?"

Cameron's temper flared wildly, then subsided as he got a grip on himself.

"I wasn't there," he said, steadily. "Neither was Roman Nose. But I hear that *you* were—until you ran away!"

A half-subdued s n i c k e r rippled among the dozen or so men who had come out of the store to listen to what promised to be the start of a fight. It was a well-known fact that the day the Indians murdered the Hungate family, Buck Winslow and four others had fled ingloriously, leaving Hungate, his wife, and two daughters to a bloody fate.

"All right," Winslow blustered, "so I ran away! Why should I stay and try to fight the Dog Soldiers? They had us outnumbered a hundred to one!"

"They did not!" Cameron contradicted. "There were exactly four Indians in the raid on the Hungates!"

"Reckon that's right," Jim Beckworth stated from the shadow of the doorway. "Neva, the Cheyenne, told Governor Evans that the Hungate raid was staged by Roman Nose and three Arapahoe warriors."

"Neva lied," Cameron replied. "Neva has always been a liar, same as Black Kettle. The raid was staged by some Southern Cheyennes, and Neva's people were in on it. Roman Nose was not there, and neither were the Dog Soldiers."

"How come you know so much about it?" Winslow demanded. "I say that Roman Nose was there, and you were probably with him!"

CAMERON'S fist caught Winslow high up on the left cheekbone, and Buck staggered back against the porch railing.

The flimsy wooden rail broke under his weight, and Winslow fell over backward, landing heavily on the board sidewalk.

He arose slowly, dazed and all but knocked out. He swayed on his feet, and glared about him with half-seeing eyes. Winslow had been drinking, and there was a look in his bloodshot eyes that Cameron did not like. The man was wild as a snake.

"If you fellers aim to fight, get off my porch," Beckworth said, pushing Cameron out into the street.

Winslow lunged and swung a roundhouse right that Cameron dodged easily. Cameron's heavy fist sledged Winslow's face with a wet, sodden sound, and the man went down again. But he arose quickly this time, and lurched after Cameron, trying to bring his superior weight and strength into play by grappling. But Cameron was faster on his feet than his opponent. He sidestepped neatly, hammering Winslow over the ear with short, chopping blows.

Winslow straightened up to launch a quick right cross that sent Cameron spinning. Before Cameron could recover his balance, Winslow kicked him in the stomach. Cameron jerked back, then slugged Winslow under the chin.

Winslow grunted with pain, then hurled himself forward, thumbs gouging for Cameron's eyes.

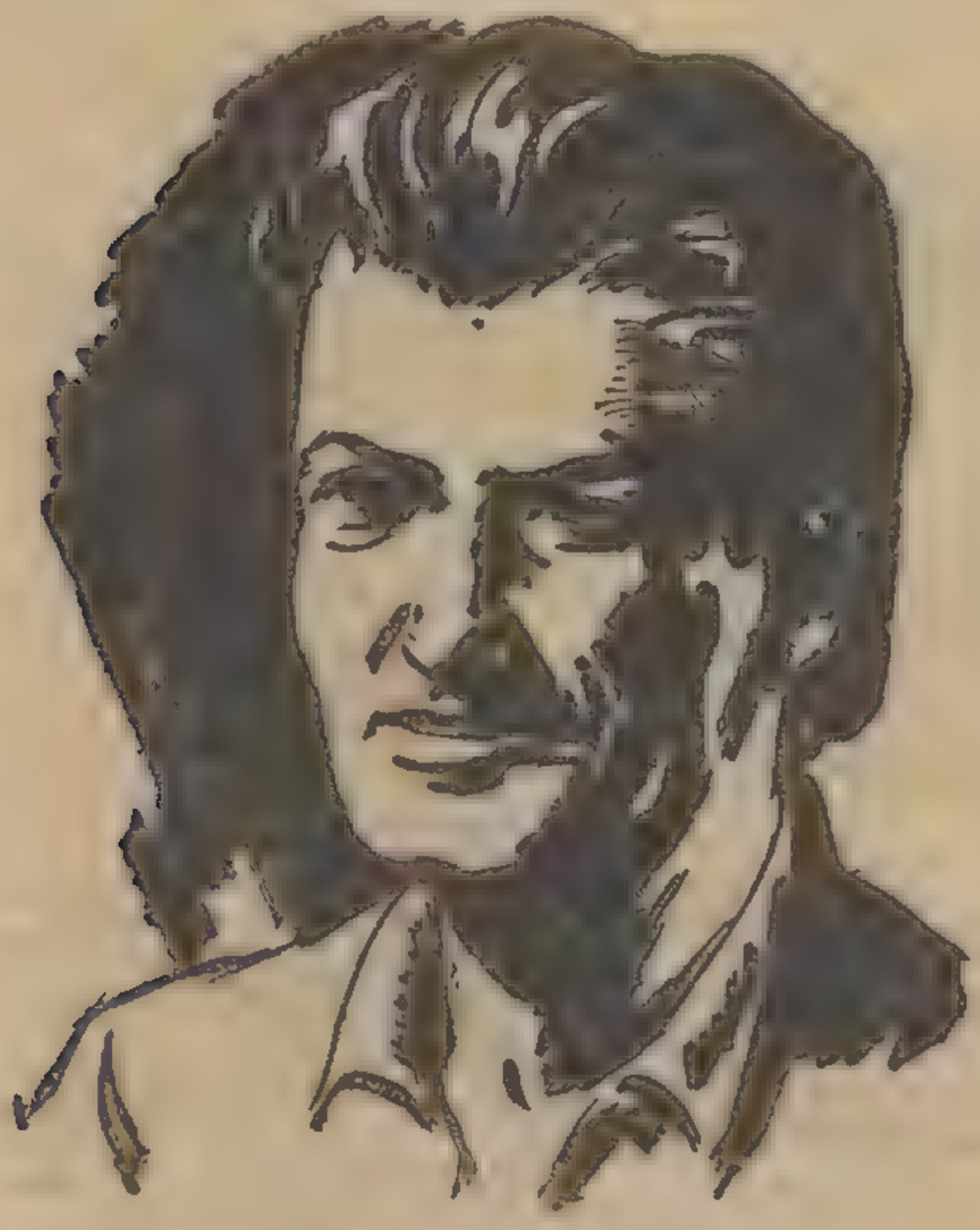
Dodging back, Cameron hit first on the nose, then upon the mouth. There was a crunch of teeth and flesh.

Winslow screamed in drunken panic, fell flat and rolled across the sidewalk, blood running from his nose and mouth.

Joe Cameron turned and started walking down the street. Then he stopped and turned around. When he

saw that Winslow still had not arisen, he headed for the hitching rail where his horse was tied.

Cameron figured that he had no friends in this town, and the quicker he got out onto the prairie, the better. But he had taken only a few steps when Winslow's voice brought him up short. Cameron looked back over his shoulder and saw that Winslow was standing,



JOE CAMERON

feet spread apart, left hand hooked in his cartridge belt. In his right hand he held a wicked-looking black revolver.

Cameron shifted his leg holster around into a more convenient position. Winslow shot, once. Cameron heard the bullet pop past his ear, and then he heard the tinkle of breaking glass as the bullet plowed into window glass.

Cameron's draw was fast, but it seemed to him at the time that it took him half an hour to get the gun loose from the holster.

He was surprised to see Winslow drop his gun, grab at his stomach, and then slowly buckle at the knees. Cameron knew then that he had shot him. He stood there watching Winslow crumple forward onto his face.

Heads popped out of windows and doorways all down the street. When people saw Winslow folding up, and Cameron standing with a gun in his hand, the heads popped back out of sight again.

Squawman Delaney and Bugle McDowell came down off of Beckworth's porch and started for Winslow.

"Stay where you are!" Cameron barked. "First gent who makes a war-like move, gets stretched out alongside of Winslow!"

The two squawmen backed up onto the porch. Every man in the crowd ostentatiously kept his hands out in plain sight.

QUICKLY Cameron stuck his gun back into the holster and headed for the hitching-rail. He vaulted into the saddle, wondering what to do about his two pack horses. He had sold his catch of furs about an hour ago, and the pack horses were in the livery stable over by the Elephant Corral. He guessed they would have to stay there. The livery stable man could have them. He thanked his lucky stars that he had disposed of the furs before he had met Winslow, and that the three thousand dollars in gold he had received for them was safely stowed in his money belt.

He jabbed spurs to his horse, and the startled animal began making far-apart tracks away from there. Cameron figured he had a little head start should anyone try to follow him.

Perhaps no one pursued him at all, for he never caught sight of the posse's dust on his trail.

After several days of hard riding, he found himself on a sandstone bluff overlooking the Platte River at a point which he figured was a half day's ride from Roman Nose's Cheyenne camp. A lonesome place it was, too, in that spring of 1868.

But Joe Cameron was accustomed to loneliness, and after he had picketed his tired horse, he cooked a hasty supper, gulped his food hungrily, rolled in his blankets before the dying fire, and fell

into the deep sleep of utter exhaustion.

When he awoke in the morning, it was growing light. Cameron sat up, put on his hat, and fumbled in a shirt pocket for papers and tobacco. With fingers that were stiff with cold, he built a cigarette, and started to light a match, then thought better of it. It was still dark enough for the flare of a match to be seen for a far piece over the prairie, and he suddenly remembered that he had become a man who needed to see before being seen. He waited patiently until the light had increased considerably, then he lighted his cigarette and sat smoking, contentedly.

As he smoked, he wondered again, as he had a dozen times in the past few days, why Buck Winslow had picked a fight with him. He had heard of Winslow; in fact, he had known the man by sight, and knew something of his unsavory history. Perhaps Winslow had been one of those men who grow quarrelsome when drunk, and picked a fight with the first victim whose face he did not like.

But Cameron had a feeling that there was more to it than that. He felt that the presence of Squawman Delaney and Bugle McDowell had had something to do with it.

Cameron knew that Delaney and McDowell were hand in glove with White Bull, the medicine man, whose sole purpose in life was to stir up trouble between the whites and the Cheyennes. And Cameron knew that he had incurred White Bull's enmity by using his influence with Roman Nose to keep that great leader off the wartrail.

Cameron had been surprised to see Delaney and McDowell in Denver City. They had been in Roman Nose's camp when he had left to take his furs to the white man's town. Why had they come to Denver City? Why had they been with Buck Winslow, and why had Winslow tried to kill him?

For the time being, Cameron gave up trying to figure out the answers to these questions, and he began to wonder what to do with his money belt and with the three thousand dollars in gold which it contained. Thirty one-hundred-dollar gold pieces made a heavy weight, and he was getting sick of having it sagging about his waist. He guessed maybe he'd bury the gold, if he could find a suitable spot.

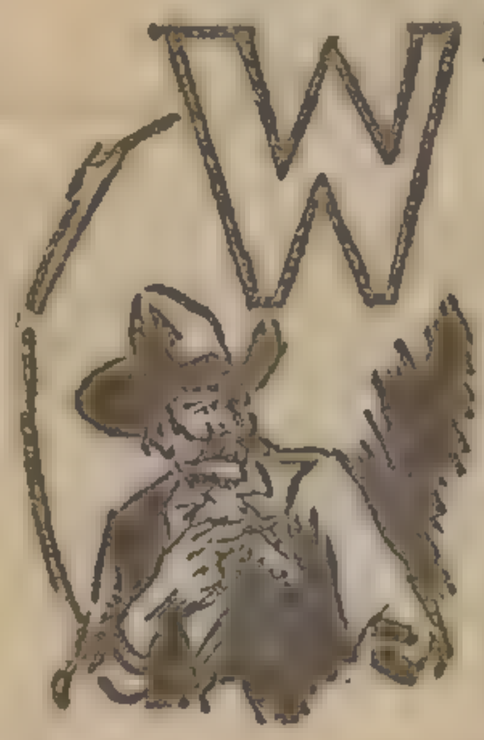
Right here would not be a good place, he decided. It was too far off from the regular trail to be handy, if he wanted to get the gold in a hurry. He decided to wait a while longer before burying it.

He climbed out of his bedroll, dragged on his boots, and gathered buffalo chips and dried grass for a small fire. When the fire was blazing cheerfully, he put on coffee and beans. While these were heating, he made up his mind to return to the Cheyenne camp without further delay.

When he had finished eating, he rolled up his blankets, put out the fire, caught his horse, and a few minutes later was riding across the plains in the direction of the Indian encampment.

CHAPTER II

Roman Nose Wrecks a Train



WHITE BULL, medicine man of the Cheyenne Indians, sat on the sunny side of his lodge and watched the sunset that flared in the western sky. As his eyes studied the reds and golds that shifted constantly along the horizon, his mind was filled with worry over his good friend, Roman Nose.

His worrying was not occasioned by the fact that Roman Nose had not yet returned after ten days on the war trail. White Bull was worried because he felt that Roman Nose was losing interest in the fight against the hated railroad. The big warrior had trapped most of the winter with Joe Cameron, and now that spring had come, he talked more of buffalo hunting than he did of scalping parties.

This change of attitude on the part of Roman Nose, White Bull laid to the influence of Cameron. While Cameron had been in camp, several war parties had ridden out, but Roman Nose had not gone with them.

As soon as Cameron had left camp for Denver City with his furs, White Bull had persuaded Roman Nose to raise a war party, and to set forth to harry the railroad construction gangs.

White Bull liked and admired the white man who had lived so long with the Cheyennes, but he was beginning to resent the influence which Cameron exerted over Roman Nose. The medicine man had finally decided that Joe Cameron must be put out of the way.

So shortly after Cameron had left for Denver City, White Bull had had a long talk with Squawman Delaney and Bugle McDowell. The medicine man had concealed his contempt for the two renegades, for they were useful tools when there was dirty work to be done.

The upshot of his conversation with the white men had been that the two worthies soon rode rapidly away over the ridges in the direction of Denver City. And now, as White Bull sat in the slanting rays of the setting sun, he felt sorry that he would never see Joe Cameron again. But, he told himself, Cameron had been in the way of plans that were much bigger than the life of any one man. So Cameron had to die. And he must be killed by a white man and, if possible, in the white man's town, for Roman Nose would be furious if he learned that any Indian had harmed his friend Cameron.

Not only was the medicine man jealous of Cameron's influence over Roman Nose, but he sincerely believed that he knew what was best for the Cheyenne Nation. The railroad *must* be stopped, and Roman Nose was the only Indian leader who wielded enough power among the tribes to fight successfully against the Iron Horse.

White Bull was a good deal older than Roman Nose, and remembered the day of the warrior's birth. It was while the Cheyennes were camped on Owl Creek,

"The Iron Horse hit the bent track, went up in the air, and was destroyed." (Chap. II)

a tributary of the South Platte. The time had been about thirty winters ago. A brief thunder storm had broken over the camp just at the moment of Roman Nose's birth. A woman, who had been present at the time, reported that a huge bat had flown into the lodge, where it had remained until the storm had passed.

When this had been reported to White Bull, he had decreed that the new-born baby boy should be named *Sauts,* the Bat. And so he had been called until the white men began to refer to him as "Roman Nose" because of the great hooked nose that dominated his otherwise handsome face.

Now even the Indians were calling him *Wookinih,* which meant hooked nose, or beak. This was as close as the name "Roman Nose" could be translated into the Cheyenne tongue.

White Bull knew that Roman Nose was very superstitious, for he himself had carefully nurtured that superstition. But since Joe Cameron had become one of the big warrior's best friends, Roman Nose had grown a bit careless about observing some of White Bull's superstitious rites. He no longer seemed to have any ambition, or desire for glory or scalps. White Bull had decided finally that Joe Cameron must die.

WHITE BULL'S reverie was interrupted by the arrival of Joe Cameron! He came riding into camp just as the last crimson traces of the sunset were dying away. As soon as the white man had turned his horse into the pony herd, he had come in search of his friends, Roman Nose, and White Bull.

"How, *kola*!" White Bull cried, hiding his disappointed surprise. "Did you have a good trip?"

"Like most trips," Cameron replied, in the Cheyenne tongue, "it was both good and bad. I sold my furs for a fair price, and there is three thousand dollars in my money belt."

"That is a great deal of money," White Bull agreed, hesitantly, for he wasn't sure just how much that amount of gold would buy.

"But there was a fight in Denver City," Cameron continued. "I killed a white man named Buck Winslow. He was one of Hungate's men."

Those fools! White Bull thought to himself. Why had Delaney and McDowell entrusted the job to Winslow?

"Hungate!" White Bull exclaimed, aloud. "Why does that name always mean trouble for the Cheyennes and for their friends? It was the killing of the Hungate family that started the Denver City Long Knives on the war trail and made them kill so many of our people at Sand Creek!"

"And now the whites are saying that it was Roman Nose who led the raid on the Hungate ranch," Cameron told him.

"It is not true!" White Bull cried.

"I know it," said Cameron. "But where is Roman Nose now?"

"He is on the war trail," White Bull replied, triumphantly.

Cameron stared at the medicine man for a long moment. You are responsible for that, he thought. As soon as my back was turned, you went to work on Roman Nose and talked him into taking out a war party. It sickened Cameron to think of his friend riding back into camp with the scalps of white people dancing on his feathered lance.

"Where did he go?" he asked, finally.

"He rode south to strike the railroad," the medicine man explained. "Ten suns ago they left, two hundred of them, mostly Dog Soldiers and Red Shields, with a few Sioux who joined them just as they were leaving. Roman Nose said he hoped to wreck the train."

"White Bull," Cameron said, slowly, "you were very foolish to send Roman Nose out on such a war party. You cannot stop the Iron Horse! The track will be pushed westward until it stretches far beyond the sunset."

Cameron leaned forward. "Nothing can stop it," he continued. "If Roman Nose does not leave the railroad alone, the white war chiefs will come with thousands of Long Knives and they will destroy this camp the way the Denver City soldiers destroyed Black Kettle's lodges. And the people who are not

killed will be herded north into Canada, or sent into exile to the south."

"I do not agree," White Bull replied. "I have seen the Iron Horse. It is true that he is big and terrible, but he cannot run without the track. If men put the track down, other men can take it up. The Cheyennes will tear up the track faster than the white man can put it down. We will let the white man keep

PUEBLO JONES

his railroad to the point where it now ends, that place which the whites call 'End of Track.' But beyond that point, the rails must not go!"

Cameron knew that it was useless to argue with White Bull. In spite of White Bull's wisdom, and his very high intelligence, the medicine man could not be expected to grasp the magnitude of the thing he believed he could defeat. To him, as to most Indians, the solution was simple. If the white man laid down more track during the day, you went out at night and pulled it up again. You did this until the white man got disgusted and went home.

And if the white man sent large bodies of Long Knives to attack your camp, you simply scattered into small groups and fled in all directions, so that the troops did not know which group to chase. The people then assembled later on at a previously appointed rendezvous, and everything was as it had been before the Long Knives came.

CAMERON sat silently, wondering how to explain to White Bull about the thousands of men working on the railroad; the tens of thousands of well-trained troops that were coming to guard the track; the great financial interests who were pouring unheard-of fortunes into building the roadbed, interests to whom the Cheyennes were merely a handful of dirty, lice-ridden savages who would either leave the railroad alone or be ground under its iron wheels.

Cameron knew that it was useless to try to explain these things. The only way he could save the Cheyenne Nation was to keep Roman Nose off the war trail.

"Bugle McDowell and Squawman Delaney were in Denver City," Cameron observed. "They were with Winslow when he crowded me into killing him."

"That is strange!" White Bull commented.

"Is it?" Cameron asked, quietly. "I knew that Winslow was no good, but hadn't thought of him as a friend of those treacherous renegades!"

"I knew Winslow long ago, when we used to visit the Sioux," White Bull said. "He lived with the Sioux in those days. I never trusted him."

"When Delaney and McDowell get back to camp," Cameron suggested, "you better tell 'em that next time they should do the job themselves, or get somebody better than Winslow to try it!"

The Indian and the white man stared at each other for a long moment, then something like a smile flickered in the eyes of both.

"Sometimes when a man's plans go wrong," White Bull said, finally, "he is glad. Quarrels among friends are better settled without bloodshed."

"Ipewa!" said Cameron. "Good! Friends should speak with a straight tongue!"

The two men lapsed into silence. As they sat side by side, smoking their

pipes, an old man, a camp crier, came riding slowly among the lodges, carrying his official lance of office, and crying in a loud voice:

"Roman Nose is coming! Roman Nose is coming!"

The streets between the rows of lodges filled rapidly with a mob of excited, whooping, yelling Indians. Everyone made his way toward one end of the camp, where a few chiefs had assembled and were talking to a warrior who had just galloped madly into the village.

Just as Cameron and White Bull reached the circle of chiefs, the war party came bursting over a nearby ridge. The two hundred mounted warriors rode like madmen, hurling their feathered lances high into the air and catching them skilfully as they descended. Their war whoops were deafening, and when the deep-throated whoops turned into the shrill scalp cry, it was taken up on every hand by the people waiting in the village.

Three times the charging warriors rode completely around the camp. At their head rode the gigantic Roman Nose. Stripped of everything save breech clout and moccasins, and with the long tail of his war bonnet trailing behind his head, Roman Nose finally wheeled his lavishly painted pony and thundered straight into the main street of the camp, his two hundred warriors yelling madly behind him.

The savage pageant ended as abruptly as it had begun. Once the warriors were in camp, they dismounted calmly, each man turning his horse over to a relative who came forward eagerly to take it.

The war party broke up almost immediately as the men sought their lodges to eat the feast which the squaws had started preparing as soon as word of their approach had been received.

ROMAN NOSE, putting his war bonnet away in the buckskin bag in which it was kept between war parties, greeted Cameron and White Bull with a triumphant grin.

"We wrecked the railroad for good this time!" he exulted. "Come to my lodge, and while we eat, I'll tell you about it!"

Cameron noted with pleasure that Roman Nose had no fresh scalps. At least, he, personally, had not killed any white people. The towering war leader strode swiftly through the streets, answering the jubilant greetings of the admiring people. Once more Roman Nose had been victorious! Once more the mighty war leader had brought safely home every man who had ridden with him!

Roman Nose and his wife, a plain-looking squaw named Owl Woman, greeted each other joyously for, unlike so many Indian couples, these two felt a real affection for each other. Owl Woman greeted White Bull and Cameron respectfully, and then busied herself in setting meat before her famous husband and his visitors.

"We went down to the railroad," Roman Nose explained, "and we studied the track, which as you know, seems to be made out of some kind of metal. Presently we saw a light wagon coming down the track, with two men riding in it. They were pumping something up and down."

"That was what the whites call a handcar," Cameron explained.

"All right," Roman Nose replied. "Whatever they call it, we placed a log on the track ahead of it, and when the men saw the log they could not stop, and their wagon hit it, and was thrown up into the air.

"The warriors killed the two men who were riding on the light wagon. Each of these men had a gun, but they must have been broken in the wreck, for when we picked them up, the guns broke open in the middle. One of the warriors said: 'It is a pity that these guns are broken,' and he threw them away."

"Those guns were probably Spencer carbines," Cameron told him, "and they are supposed to break open in the middle. They are what the white man calls breechloaders."

"That is too bad," Roman Nose grunted. "If we had known that, we would not have thrown them away.

"Having wrecked the light wagon, which you say is called a handcar, we decided to try to wreck the Iron Horse. Porcupine and Red Wolf got a big stick and pried up the track, and bent one of the rails into the air a foot or so. They also bent it sidewise at the same time.

"Then we waited patiently, and it grew dark, and presently we saw a light coming from the westward over the level plain. Some of the warriors rode to meet the light, and saw that it was on the front of the Iron Horse. They chased it with their ponies, but it outran even the fastest horse until it came to the place where Porcupine and Red Wolf had bent the track.

"The Iron Horse hit the bent track, and went up into the air, and all the cars behind it ran together and were destroyed.

"A man with a light in his hand ran down the length of the train, but when he reached the front end, the warriors killed him. Every other white person on the train had been killed in the wreck, it seemed.

"Inside the wooden wagons that had been broken open when the Iron Horse hit the twisted rails, we found much plunder, clothing, and great bolts of calico cloth. Many warriors tied one end of a bolt of cloth to their ponies' tails and galloped wildly about with the long strip of cloth trailing far behind."

"That was a waste of valuable cloth!" White Bull grunted.

"There was so much cloth and plunder," Roman Nose pointed out, "that we could not have carried it all home if we had had many white man's wagons. The warriors brought as much as could be carried. We set fire to the wooden wagons that run on the track and burned everything!"

"So the Iron Horse is destroyed!" White Bull exulted, jeering at Cameron. "You were just telling me that it could not be done. And Roman Nose has done it!"

"It is true that Roman Nose has destroyed one Iron Horse, and has burned the cars which it was pulling," Cameron admitted. "But there are many Iron Horses."

"Many!" Roman Nose snorted. "We have never seen but one!"

BY an effort Cameron hid his exasperation at the Indian's lack of understanding.

"That is because the track is what is called a one-way track," Cameron explained. "An Iron Horse goes to the End of Track and then comes back. So you see only one Iron Horse at a time, but it is not always the same Iron Horse.

"The white man has more Iron Horses than there are ponies in the Dog Soldiers' pony herd," Cameron pointed out. "The Iron Horses run everywhere in the East, connecting all the white man's camps and villages."

"We did not know that," Roman Nose said, plainly taken aback. "Although I remember that you have told me that the Iron Horse runs in this place which you call the East. I supposed it was always the one Iron Horse which we have seen."

"Destroying one Iron Horse," Cameron pressed the point, "is like destroying one train of white man's wagons. More and more will keep coming.

"Now this thing you have done will be called by the whites a very bad thing," he continued, "and Long Knives will come to attack you. And there will be very bad fighting, and many people will be killed."

"We are not afraid of the Long Knives!" Roman Nose cried. "I have fought the Long Knives many times, and always have I beaten them!"

"And you will beat them again!" White Bull said with a nod. "Do not let Cameron frighten you with his strong talk."

"He cannot frighten me!" Roman Nose laughed. "But he has worried me with this thing that he says about there being so many Iron Horses. The railroad may be harder to stop than I had thought!"

"The railroad will be impossible to stop!" Cameron insisted. "All who oppose it will die; as some of those who have opposed it have already died."

And then Cameron told Roman Nose of the shooting of Buck Winslow.

"I learned at Denver City," Cameron went on, "that General Sheridan, the great white war chief, wants the fighting to stop. A Peace Commission is coming, and the white chiefs want to council with the chiefs and leading men of the Cheyennes. There will be a treaty written."

"I'm not a chief," Roman Nose grunted, "and I don't know what treaties the chiefs may want to sign. But I'd like to go to that council so I can tell the white chiefs what I think!"

"You must go," White Bull told him. "Go and tell General Sheridan that the track must not be built beyond the place where it now comes to an end. Tell him that if one more mile of track is built, the Cheyennes will fight forever! The chiefs may sign treaties, but the Dog Soldiers will follow *you!*"

"They will follow him to his death, and theirs," Cameron predicted. "You are talking foolish talk; both of you!"

"It may be that you are right," Roman Nose agreed, slowly. "If there are as many Iron Horses as you say, it might be a good thing to sign this treaty you mention. What happens if the Cheyennes sign such a treaty?"

"You must agree to give up all the land between the Arkansas and the Platte Rivers," Cameron explained, for this much he had learned from Comstock. "You must agree to let the railroad be built through to Denver City, and you must go and live on a reservation."

"We are not reservation Indians!" White Bull protested.

"No," Roman Nose agreed. "But, Cameron, what do the whites agree to do in return for these things the Cheyennes must do?"

"They would pay the tribe much money each year," Cameron told him. "Perhaps as much as ten thousand dollars each year forever. And the whites would agree that the reservation which is chosen for you will be the Cheyenne's land for all time to come.

"Also," he continued, "the whites would give each warrior a new Spencer or Starr carbine to use in hunting, together with a great deal of ammunition. Men who understand the growing of things would come and teach the Cheyenne young men to plow and plant, and raise food. Teachers would come to put the children's feet on the white man's road. Many good things would be done for the Cheyennes. Is not this better than fighting?"

THE Indian shook his head. "Nothing is better than fighting!" White Bull cried. "An Indian man is born to go to war. It is his only reason for being!"

"On this reservation, and in this new way of life," Roman Nose asked, "we could at least send war parties against the Crows and the Pawnee, couldn't we?"

"No," Cameron replied. "There must be peace or the treaty is no good."

Roman Nose thought seriously for a long time. Finally, he said:

"I can see that growing food would be a good thing. But this is woman's work, and our Cheyenne women could learn to do it if shown how by these teachers you mention.

"But what would our men do? When the young men have no war parties to go out with, there is nothing to do but hunt. Men grow restless, and there is trouble!"

Cameron did not think it expedient to tell Roman Nose that the Cheyenne men would be expected to work in the fields and to become farmers. No Cheyenne warrior would agree to such an unheard-of thing, and Cameron knew that Roman Nose would gladly die fighting before he would stoop to pulling weeds or trudging behind a plow.

Cameron decided that he had said enough for the time being. He had given Roman Nose much food for thought, and he could see that the big warrior

Roman Nose plunged from his speeding horse (Chap. XIV)

was mightily impressed with what he had heard.

White Bull saw it, too, and was disturbed. The medicine man felt that much harm had been done, for now Roman Nose would be more reluctant than ever to take the war trail until he had thought over all that Cameron had said to him. White Bull resolved that he must find a way to offset the white man's words.

As they sat inside the lodge, silently staring at the dying fire, each man's thoughts busy with what had just been said, a sudden clap of thunder caused Roman Nose to raise his head.

"Thunderbird is flying low!" he commented.

White Bull seized upon this remark, not yet seeing his way clear, but hoping to be able to make something of it.

"Perhaps it is a good omen, Roman Nose," he said. "Remember, you were born during a thunder storm. Let's go outside and watch the lightning."

CHAPTER III

The Magic War Bonnet

CAMERON understood why White Bull desired to watch the lightning, for everyone knew that medicine men frequently received messages from Thunderbird.

Presently, Roman Nose and Cameron stood with White Bull on a ridge just outside of camp, watching a summer thunder shower that moved along the distant horizon.

Jagged streaks of lightning were flashing in the sky, when White Bull cried, suddenly:

"Look! There is a vision in the lightning!"

"I don't see anything," Cameron commented.

"Quiet!" the medicine man commanded. "Thunderbird speaks!"

A long peal of thunder rolled clear across the sky, dying in far-off claps that rattled faintly.

"The vision is gone," White Bull said. "But I saw it plainly. Now I must get busy and do what Thunderbird has told me to do."

Roman Nose had seen nothing unusual in the lightning, nor had he heard the thunder utter any words. But this did not surprise him, for he knew that White Bull, being a mighty medicine man, could see and hear things not intended for the eyes and ears of a mere mortal.

"What was this vision that you have seen in the sky?" Roman Nose asked, respectfully.

"It was a great war bonnet," White Bull explained. "A beautiful war bonnet. And the voice of Thunderbird spoke, saying: 'See this, White Bull! Make one like it for your greatest warrior!' "

"And which of us did Thunderbird say is the greatest warrior?" Roman Nose wondered.

"He did not say," White Bull admitted. "But since you were with me when the vision came, I shall make this magic war bonnet and give it to you."

"To me!" Roman Nose was honestly amazed. "I am not our greatest warrior!"

"You will be," White Bull assured him, "after I have done all things as Thunderbird directed!"

Cameron was worried. He thought he saw what White Bull was leading up to, and he knew that the medicine man's scheme would probably work. Roman Nose was quite obviously believing every word that White Bull said, and Cameron knew that once he had possession of a magic war bonnet there would be no keeping him off the war trail. Yet the white man dared not interfere, for the words and the works of a medicine man were sacred.

So White Bull went to work to fashion a war bonnet exactly like the one that Thunderbird had shown him in the vision. He gathered together leather, and well-tanned skins of birds and beasts, and feathers, and paints.

On the front of the new war bonnet, White Bull fashioned a single buffalo horn, beautifully polished. On the right side, he tied the skin of a hawk, and on the left side, the skin of a bat. This was because the hawk flies high and is hard to shoot, while the bat flies at night, and cannot be caught.

On the back of the bonnet, White Bull tied the skin of a swallow, because the swallow flies close to the ground, and zig-zags back and forth. This would make the person wearing the bonnet very hard to hit when shot at.

On top, and behind the polished buffalo horn, White Bull tied the skin of a kingfisher. This was because the kingfisher dives into the water, and makes a hole, but the water closes behind him and covers up the hole. This means that if the wearer of the bonnet were wounded, the bullet or arrow hole would heal immediately.

All around the brim of the bonnet, the medicine man fastened the most beautiful eagle feathers he could find. Also, he made two long streamers of feathers that hung down the back and just cleared the ground when a man as tall as Roman Nose wore the bonnet on his head.

AFTER certain lengthy and complicated rites and ceremonies had been performed, White Bull announced that the war bonnet was completed. He pronounced the bonnet a magic thing, and proclaimed to the whole camp that when Roman Nose wore this bonnet, no harm could come to him.

"But," he explained to Roman Nose, "there are certain rules that go with the wearing of this magic war bonnet. I had these rules directly from Thunderbird, who said he got them from Old Man Coyote himself.

"If you ride a white horse into battle," White Bull stated, "you must paint the horse with zig-zag lines of blue." And he proceeded to give similar directions applying to each color of horse which Roman Nose might happen to ride.

"But above all," White Bull concluded, "and this is the most important thing to remember, you must never again eat food that has been lifted with anything made of metal. It will be all right to eat food that has been cooked in a metal pot or pan, but always your food must be lifted from the fire and eaten with the fingers or with a wooden stick.

"If this rule is broken, the magic power of this war bonnet will be broken also, and it will no longer have the power to protect you. So remember; never again eat anything that has been lifted with a metal knife or fork, or with anything made of metal!"

Roman Nose believed all this, for he trusted White Bull implicitly. He had the utmost faith in the magic powers of his friend. He accepted the war bonnet gracefully, and with no little superstitious awe, firmly believing that so long as he wore it and obeyed the rules and taboos, no harm could come to him in battle.

Cameron had lived long enough among the Cheyennes to know that every Indian in camp believed as Roman Nose believed, and he dared not even so much as look as though he were skeptical. When Roman Nose proudly showed him the war bonnet, Cameron had no choice but to admire it, and to exclaim over its magic powers, even though he, of course, did not for a moment suppose that the bonnet had any power to protect Roman Nose or anyone else.

Cameron wanted to cry out against the childish nonsense; to snatch the bonnet away from Roman Nose and pitch it into the fire. He could scarcely resist the urge to tell Roman Nose that there were no such things as magic powers, but he said nothing, for he knew that a white man would undoubtedly be killed on the spot for speaking such sacrilege.

However, the events of the next few months led even Cameron to wonder if there could possibly be any truth to the claim that this war bonnet had the power to protect its wearer.

Without consulting anyone, Roman Nose decided that he must test at once the powers of his new war bonnet. No

small ride or horse-stealing party could sufficiently test the magic, so he determined to attempt something really big. He announced that he was getting up a war party of two hundred picked warriors, and that the object of this party would be to burn one of the white man's forts, and to wipe out the garrison of Long Knives.

"There are many Long Knives at each of the forts," Cameron protested, "and they are behind very strong stockades. They have smoke-poles on wheels," he added, referring to the howitzers which usually were mounted on a fort's stockade.

"Nothing can harm me," Roman Nose replied, stubbornly, "now that I have this magic war bonnet. After we have killed everyone at this fort which we shall attack, we will go south and fight the railroad again. I will ride up to every Iron Horse I see, and kill the white men who are on it. Their guns cannot harm me."

Cameron realized that nothing was to be gained by arguing, so he went to his own lodge and began packing his few belongings. For he had decided that if Roman Nose intended to continue the raids against the whites, he could no longer stay with his Indian friends. White Bull had outwitted him, for the time being, and Cameron knew that his usefulness at the Cheyenne camp was at an end, at least temporarily.

CAMERON felt that he should report the latest developments to Buffalo Bill Comstock, chief of the Army scouts. Perhaps he would join Comstock's scouts, and place his knowledge of the Cheyennes at the disposal of General Sheridan.

While Cameron was busy packing, he heard a camp crier announcing the formation of the war party. Riding slowly among the lodges, the crier, a former chief, and a venerable and much-honored man, called loudly upon the military societies of the Cheyennes.

He called first upon the Dog Soldiers, mightiest and most dreaded military society on the plains. He called upon the Fox Soldiers, the Elk Soldiers, the Shield Soldiers, the Bowstring Soldiers, and then called upon the Crazy Dogs. All of the great societies of warriors he called upon, telling them that Roman Nose needed men for a war party.

As it happened, a large encampment of Sioux arrived in the vicinity about this time, and began pitching their lodges close to the Cheyenne camp. When the Sioux heard that Roman Nose was going out to fight the white men, they sent over to learn if they might go along.

Roman Nose now decided that he would make this first test of his war bonnet as strenuous a test as possible, so he had the criers announce that all who wished to go on the war party would be welcome.

By the time Cameron came out of his lodge, carrying his saddle and such small articles as he wanted to take with him, the warriors were thronging about Roman Nose's tepee in ever-increasing numbers. After Cameron had brought his horse in from the pony herd, and was preparing to saddle up, White Bull came to talk with him.

"Looks like you've started something big this time!" Cameron grunted to the medicine man.

"It is well that you are leaving," White Bull said, bluntly. "When this war party comes back, they may not be feeling very friendly toward any white man!"

"I am leaving now," Cameron told him. "But I'll be back! You've outwitted me for the time being, White Bull, but I haven't given up yet. Some day I'll find a way to keep Roman Nose off the war trail!

"Now I am going to Fort Wallace," Cameron continued. "The peace commission I spoke to you about will be coming soon, and there will be a council.

"Roman Nose has said that he will come to the council. You should come, too, White Bull."

"If the white chief asks us to come, we will come," White Bull nodded. "But there will be no treaty signed unless

the railroad is to be stopped!"

"All this will be discussed at the council," Cameron said, as he mounted his horse. "I will see you there!"

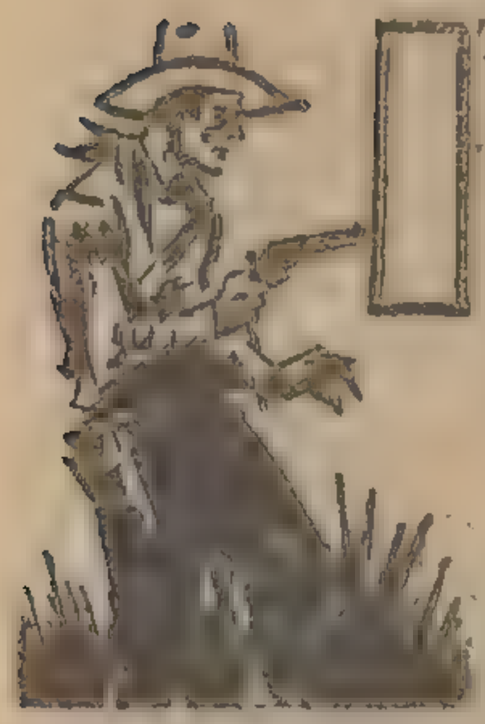
"Ipewa!" said White Bull. "Good!"

As Cameron rode out of the village, he estimated that nearly one thousand warriors, Cheyenne and Sioux together, were assembled in a mob at one end of the camp, receiving their instructions from Roman Nose who, as pipe bearer, or leader of the expedition, would decide important matters.

Cameron knew that the war party would leave camp at dawn, riding in small groups, widely spread over the prairie, so as not to raise one large cloud of dust, the way cavalry always did. He wished that he knew which of the white man's forts Roman Nose intended to attack, for there was still time to ride and warn the garrison. But since he had no idea as to where Roman Nose would strike, Cameron decided the best thing for him to do was to make his way to Fort Wallace.

CHAPTER IV

Fighting Phil



IT WAS a five-days' ride to Fort Wallace, and when Cameron reached that lonely little outpost, he discovered that none of Comstock's scouts was in the vicinity.

"Most of them are out on the plains," an army officer told Cameron, "but Comstock, Grover, and Gorman are at Comstock's place, about five miles from here."

After listening to directions as to how to get there, Cameron rode out to Buffalo Bill Comstock's cabin, where he found the three buckskin clad scouts loafing, eating, and resting their horses.

"It's been kind of quiet," Bearfoot Gorman explained. He and Cameron were old friends.

"It won't be quiet much longer!" Cameron predicted.

Then he told the scouts what had been transpiring in the Cheyenne camp. He repeated most of his conversations with Roman Nose and White Bull, and described the making of the magic war bonnet.

Grover and Comstock, both of them medium-sized men, clad in fringed deerskin, listened quietly, without comment.

"And Roman Nose believes all this stuff about the war bonnet?" Bearfoot asked. "Mebbe he ain't as smart as I been figgerin' he was!" As he spoke the burly scout caressed his bushy black beard thoughtfully.

"It ain't a question of bein' smart," Buffalo Bill Comstock pointed out. "Lots of smart folks are superstitious, and even them that ain't superstitious will believe almost anything their religious leaders tells 'em."

"That goes double for Injuns," said Sharp Grover, speaking out of his long experience with the Sioux. "Sounds to me like there'll be no keepin' this Roman Nose off the war trail now that he's got that magic war bonnet."

"He's on the war trail right now," Cameron explained. "The day I left camp, Roman Nose was raising a thousand warriors to attack one of the forts. He wouldn't say which fort."

"We got to let Sheridan know about this!" Bill Comstock decided. "When did the Injuns leave on the raid?"

"I don't know, but I'd say about four or five days ago."

"Where do you reckon General Sheridan is at?" Bearfoot asked.

"I think he's at Fort Hayes," Comstock replied. "Look, two of us got to stay here to guard the hosses; they're the only spare mounts the scouts has got. So suppose me and Grover stay here, while you and Cameron ride to Fort Hayes? Cameron can tell the General everything that's happened, and you can bring word of what Sheridan wants us to do next."

"All right," Bearfoot agreed. "Wish we knew which fort Roman Nose was aimin' to tackle!"

"We'll find out soon enough!" Comstock said. "Mebbe Sheridan will already have word of it when you reach Hayes. Turn your hoss in the corral, Cameron, and rope a fresh one. Your pony looks about foundered. Remember it's a far piece to Fort Hayes."

Half an hour later, Cameron and Bearfoot were mounted and ready to start. Each was equipped with a Spencer carbine, a Colt cap-and-ball revolver, and a good supply of ammunition. With these, and a saddle-bag stuffed with jerked meat, together with a canteen of spring water, they felt prepared to meet any emergencies.

After they had ridden a short distance from the horse corral, Bearfoot looked back to where Grover and Comstock stood watching them ride away.

"Hate to leave them two fellers alone this-a-way," Bearfoot commented. "They never did like each other, and here lately, they been arguin' an' quarrelin' somethin' fierce!"

"Grover acts kind of surly," Cameron agreed, "but he and Comstock didn't show any bad blood when I was around."

"When they're talkin' business, they gets along pretty good," Bearfoot explained, "but when they're just loafin' around, waitin' for something to happen, they gets like two she-wolves in the same den."

"It's a wonder Comstock would keep Grover among his scouts!" Cameron commented.

THE big buckskin-clad man shrugged. "He's a durned good scout, that's why," Bearfoot stated. "Grover knows Injuns, an' Injun ways; he's a plumb fine tracker, and a mighty handy plainsman. He don't fear nothin', and in a fight, he's as hard to handle as a bear with a sore nose."

"Comstock seems like a fine man," Cameron said. "But I didn't cotton much to Grover right from the first."

"Most people don't," Bearfoot replied. "But Bill sure is a fine feller. Everybody likes Buffalo Bill Comstock. I just hope they don't go to fightin' while we're away. Them two is fine scouts. Sometimes I think they're durned near as good as Pueblo Jones was!"

Cameron and Bearfoot rode almost due east. Their trail followed the Smoky Hill river for all but the last few miles of the journey. Where the Smoky turned sharply to the south, the riders continued toward the east, finally striking Fort Hayes, which was located on a north fork of the river.

Pushing their way through the crowds that milled in the main street of the railroad end-of-track town, Cameron and Bearfoot made their way to General Sheridan's headquarters.

As soon as they explained that they had been sent by Buffalo Bill Comstock with important news for the General, the sentries out in front let them into the building, which proved to be a one-room affair. The room was long and narrow, and at the far end of it, the hero of Winchester sat at a small table, intently studying a map.

Before the table stood a tall, very handsome man clad in a white buckskin suit and high dragoon boots with jangling spurs at heel. He held a broad-brimmed hat in one hand, and a pair of beaded leather gauntlets in the other.

"I can make it, General," the tall, handsome man was saying. "It's only ninety-five miles to Fort Dodge!"

"But several men have been killed recently by Indians while trying to get through," Sheridan pointed out. "And, anyway, you just now rode in with dispatches from Fort Larned, and that's a sixty-five-mile ride. I can't ask you to start right out and ride ninety-five miles more without rest!"

"I can make it, General," the tall man insisted. "Just give me the dispatches, and I'll take 'em through!"

"Well, all right," General Sheridan agreed, somewhat reluctantly, as he handed the tall man a small packet of papers. The tall man accepted them, thrust them under the belt that was pulled tightly around his buckskin shirt, and saluted smartly. Then he turned and strode down the long room.

"Good luck, Cody!" General Sheridan called after him.

"Thank you, sir!" said William F. Cody, and then his eye lighted on the two scouts who stood waiting near the door.

"Why, howdy, Bearfoot!" he cried. "Where did you come from?"

"Fort Wallace," Bearfoot replied. "Got news from Bill Comstock for the General."

"Well, see you later!" Cody laughed, as he disappeared through the doorway.

GENERAL SHERIDAN had arisen from his chair and was walking toward the two scouts. Cameron saw a short, stout man with handlebar mustaches and a small goatee, a double chin, heavy eyebrows, and thinning hair that was brushed down tightly across his round head. Despite its plumpness, his face was set in stern, hard lines, and there was an imperious look in his steady eyes. A mighty tough man, was Cameron's immediate impression.

"Did I hear you say that you have news from Comstock?" General Sheridan demanded.

"Reckon you did." Bearfoot Gorman nodded. Like most buckskin men, Bearfoot set no store whatever by military courtesies. "Bill done asked us to bring you some bad news we picked up. My name's Bearfoot Gorman, and this here is Joe Cameron."

Sheridan was newly arrived in the West, and was not yet accustomed to frontier ways, but he laughed genially.

"You've already guessed that I'm Sheridan," he said. "I noticed that you and Bill Cody seemed to know each other."

"Yep," Bearfoot agreed. "I've knowed young Cody for a couple o' years. Mighty good scout, he is, too!"

"He is that!" Sheridan replied, feelingly. "You know, this town is jammed with long-haired Toms, Dicks, Petes, Jacks and Jims, who all claim to be scouts and plainsmen. They lounge around town in buckskin suits, and spin long yarns about all the Indians they've killed, but could I get one of them to take dispatches to Fort Dodge? I could not!" the General snorted.

"Shucks, General," Bearfoot growled, "half them fellers couldn't even *find* Fort Dodge!"

"Well, not a man-jack of them would try, anyway. They won't venture out of town since two men were killed the other day on the trail to Dodge! Then Cody came in this morning, just arrived from Fort Larned. He promptly volunteered to ride the ninety-five miles to Dodge, alone!"

"He'll make it too," Bearfoot predicted.

"I certainly hope so," Sheridan said. "I don't know what I'd do without Buffalo Bill Cody! But what's this bad news you have for me?"

"Cameron can tell you best about that," Bearfoot replied. "It was him brought in the information."

So Cameron told General Sheridan the story of his experiences in the

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Cheyenne camp. When he mentioned the great war party that had been preparing to attack one of the forts, Sheridan interrupted.

"That checks with the dispatches Cody brought me this morning," he said. "The Cheyennes raided the fort at Upper Platte Bridge, and killed Lieutenant Collins, Sergeant Custard, and about thirty men who were caught outside the stockade. The Indians did not attack the fort itself.

"After leaving the vicinity of the fort, they raided off down the Platte. It is feared they have burned some ranches and feed stations along the river, but we don't know where they are or what they're doing now. Could you men find out for me?"

"We can sure try, General!" Bearfoot declared.

"Good!" Sheridan nodded. "Get some sleep, draw some stores from the commissary, and I'll have the cavalry give you fresh horses. Then ride back to Fort Wallace. Tell Comstock I need to know where Roman Nose and his people are, what they are doing, and what they plan to do next. Do you scouts think that Roman Nose will attack Fort Wallace?"

"Wouldn't be surprised," Bearfoot said.

"With Roman Nose feeling the way he does now, he's likely to try anything," Cameron agreed, and then gave General Sheridan a quick outline of Roman Nose's attitude.

"I'd like to say one thing," Cameron concluded, bluntly. "You aren't going to get anywhere with councils and peace commissions! There's hard fighting ahead, General, and there'll be no peace on the prairie until Roman Nose and his warriors have been beaten in battle!"

"I'm afraid you're right," Sheridan said. "But we do have to try to accomplish something with councils, don't we? If Roman Nose will come to a council, perhaps a peace agreement could be reached."

"No, sir!" Cameron insisted. "Not a chance! But, as you say, General, the only right thing to do is to make a good try!"

"Is the garrison at Wallace strong enough to withstand an attack in force?" Sheridan asked.

FOR a moment there was a silence, as the scout thought this over.

"Couldn't say," Bearfoot grunted. "Depends on how the soldiers will fight. As you know, there's only a small detachment of the Seventh Cavalry stationed there. They look like darned good cavalrymen, but they ain't never fought Injuns."

"Don't you worry about them!" Sheridan laughed. "I'll put the Seventh up against anybody. But you men get some rest and then head back for Fort Wallace. Tell Comstock to keep me posted."

Cameron had noticed that a small safe stood in one corner of the room, and he decided that here would be a good place to leave his gold.

"General, I'd like to ask a favor," he said as he unbuckled his money-belt. "I got three thousand dollars in gold in this belt, an' I'm sick of luggin' it around. Would you keep it in your safe for me?"

"Certainly," Sheridan replied, taking the money-belt. "Wait while I have the sergeant count it and give you a receipt."

A sergeant entered at Sheridan's shouted summons. He carefully counted the gold pieces and laboriously made out a receipt.

"Don't lose that receipt," he cautioned, as he handed the paper over to Cameron. "It's got your name on it all right, but it's a printed army form, and the money is payable to the bearer."

"I'll try to hang on to it," Cameron said and grinned. "Thanks, General. That sure takes one big worry off my mind . . . and one big weight off my hips!"

"Say," Bearfoot snorted, as they left the headquarters building, "did you hear General Sheridan call Cody 'Buffalo Bill?' That ain't fair, doggone it! There's only one Buffalo Bill, an' that's

Comstock! He's a better buffalo hunter than Cody, or anybody else. These army folks have started callin' Cody 'Buffalo Bill' just because he killed a few buffalo for the railroad gangs!"

"You ever see Cody hunt buffalo?" Cameron asked.

"Nope, I never did," Bearfoot admitted.

"Then how do you know Comstock's a better hunter?" Cameron demanded. "Don't forget, Cody killed more than four thousand buffalo in the short time he was working for the railroad. Killed 'em from horseback, too!"

"Yeah," Bearfoot agreed, "that's a heap of buffalo for one man to run down and kill. But I still think they hadn't ought to go callin' Cody 'Buffalo Bill!'"

"Don't see how you can stop 'em!" Cameron laughed. "But let's get some sleep."

They mounted their horses and rode a mile or so out of town. It never occurred to either of them to stop at one of the thriving little hotels that flourished noisily in Hayes. They were much more at home bedded down on the prairie.

After they had picketed their horses, they rolled in their blankets and soon were fast asleep, the fact that it was broad daylight bothering them not at all.

They awoke shortly after dark, built a small fire, and cooked meat. After they had eaten, they turned in again and slept until dawn. Following a hasty breakfast, Cameron and Bearfoot saddled up and rode back into town, where they found that Sheridan had taken care of everything. Rations had been drawn for them, and the sergeant at the cavalry corral let them rope and saddle two strong horses. Shortly after sunrise, they were on their way to Fort Wallace.

About fifteen miles out of Fort Hayes, Bearfoot spoke suddenly.

"Funny we don't see Lookout Station. We'll be there in a minute."

A moment later, both men knew why they had not seen the station, for they caught sight of tiny wisps of smoke curling lazily from the ruins of the station building, the horse barn, the corrals and haystacks.

The three men who had kept the station were sprawled in the yard, their bodies so burned and mutilated that identification was impossible. Quite apparently, the men had been tortured with fire, then had been disemboweled and scalped.

"Can't do nothin' for them poor fellers," Bearfoot commented afterward, as they rode steadily westward. "Wish we'd had time to bury 'em, but we didn't. How long ago do you reckon the Injuns left there?"

"Not more than three hours ago, I'd judge by the sign," Cameron replied. "But they're headin' south, from their pony tracks, so we aren't likely to run into 'em, long as we keep to the west."

ON the morning of the third day, Cameron sighted a small cloud of dust moving rapidly toward them from the west. The dust streaked up from the trail, and at the base of the moving dust column, appeared a small, black dot that bobbed and swayed. Both men knew that the dot was a lone horseman, and as the dot drew nearer, they could tell by the way he rode that the horseman was not an Indian.

When the rider was within hailing distance, Cameron saw to his surprise that he was young Bill Cody. Cameron and Bearfoot drew rein; and so did Cody.

"What you doin'!" Bearfoot demanded. "Thought you went to Dodge!"

"I did!" Cody laughed. "But when I got there, they wanted me to take some dispatches to Fort Larned. From there I cut around to Fort Wallace, and now I'm headed back to Hayes to tell Sheridan that the Cheyennes attacked Fort Wallace."

"You don't say!" Bearfoot exclaimed. "How did the boys make out?"

"Pretty fair," Cody replied. "The Indians attacked twice, but the soldiers drove 'em off both times. Well, see you later. I'm some pressed for time!" And away he went, his arm rising and fall-

ing as he pounded the sides of his straining mount.

"You know," Bearfoot commented, "I been doin' some figgerin'. When Cody gets back to Hayes, he will have ridden about three hundred and seventy-five miles in about fifty-eight hours! And with the plains a-swarmin' with hostiles! He's quite a feller, that Cody!"

"Doesn't he ever eat or sleep?" Cameron wondered. "So the Cheyennes jumped Fort Wallace! I'm anxious to get there and learn what happened!"

When they finally trotted up to the fort, everything seemed normal at first glance. All of the buildings were standing, and soldiers were lounging about the parade ground. But half a dozen fresh graves showed that the garrison had sustained losses.

"It was Roman Nose, and three hundred Cheyenne warriors," Comstock told them later. "They give us quite a battle. They attacked the stage station near here, and drove off all the stock. When we got word of this, we got ready for a fight, and it's good thing we did, too, for pretty quick, there they come, chargin' over the prairie, yellin', singin' and carryin' on somethin' fierce.

"These here Seventh Cavalry soldiers are all right!" Comstock continued. "They ain't but a handful of 'em, but they goes chargin' out to meet the Injuns like they had the whole U. S. Army right behind 'em.

"After a bit, the cavalry dismounted and formed a hollow square, with them three hundred warriors ridin' a ring around 'em. I was thar, and so was Grover. Seems like everybody wanted to get into the fight!"

"You're sure it was Roman Nose?" Cameron asked. "Did you see him?"

"Sure enough did!" Comstock nodded. "And, say, that new war bonnet of his is a beauty. I bet thirty cavalrymen fired point-blank at Román Nose when he wasn't more than fifty yards off, an' not a doggone bullet touched him! And some of them soldiers can shoot, too!"

"The magic war bonnet seems to work, doesn't it?" Cameron commented. "Where did Roman Nose and the Cheyennes go after he left here?"

"They headed west," Comstock replied. "And when Bill Cody was through here, I asked him to tell General Sheridan that we needs more troops in these parts."

Sheridan must have acted promptly on receipt of Comstock's message, for several days later, the little garrison at Fort Wallace was amazed to hear a band playing in the distance.

"Now what durned fool is traipsin' over the prairie at a time like this with a band?" Bearfoot grunted, in disgust, as he, Cameron, Grover, and Comstock galloped out to take a "look-see."

Presently over a nearby ridge came riding a full military band, mounted on white horses, and playing "Garry Owen" as though on parade. Behind them came the entire Seventh Cavalry, accoutrements flashing in the sun, flags flying, and guidons snapping in the breeze. And at their head rode Lieut.-Colonel, Brevet Major-General George Armstrong.

CHAPTER V

"It Looks Like a Trap"

UNDOUBTEDLY the builders of Fort Wallace had not contemplated the garrisoning of an entire regiment of cavalry, so the Seventh were forced to pitch tents about the parade ground. General Custer took one look at the log and adobe buildings and decided that he, too, would be better off in a tent.

So the general's tent, a spacious affair which he always carried with him, was erected, and as soon as this had been done, Custer called a council of war.

As a result of this council, Cameron and his fellow scouts were sent to comb the prairies far and wide. They saw not a single Indian. All trails and signs led to the south and east, and the

scouts came to the conclusion that the Cheyennes had moved down to the Pawnee Fork, which had long been one of their favorite camping places.

"The Indians are hard to get at when they're camped there," Cameron explained to General Custer. "It's a good day's march from the nearest military post, yet the Pawnee Fork puts the Indians where they can raid the Smoky Hill Trail, the Santa Fe Trail, or the construction gangs on the railroad with equal ease. I think you'll find the hostiles camped somewhere along Pawnee Fork, north and west of Fort Larned."

Cameron's judgment was verified a few days later when Custer received dispatches from Fort Larned. Summoning his officers and scouts, Custer divulged the contents of the messages.

"Major-General Hancock is at Fort Larned," he explained. "He has a battery of light artillery, and seven companies of infantry. He has ordered me to join him there with as many troops of the Seventh as I can take away from Fort Wallace.

"We'll leave only enough men to garrison this place," Custer continued. "We'll march tomorrow morning with eight troops of the regiment. I'll want Cameron, Comstock, Grover, and Gorman for scouts.

"Hancock says that the Sioux and the Cheyenne are camped on the Pawnee Fork, and runners have gone out to them, asking the chiefs and head men to meet Hancock at Larned for a peace council."

"I doubt if they'll come in for a council," Cameron commented. "Even if they do come in, it won't mean anything. No matter what treaties the chiefs sign, the warriors will follow Roman Nose. If you can get *him* to sign a treaty, then there will be peace, but not before!"

"I'm afraid you are right," General Custer agreed. "Hancock says he doesn't want war with the tribes, and that there will be no fighting unless the Indians start it. But if they won't come to terms voluntarily, perhaps they can be forced.

"When I arrive with eight troops of the Seventh, Hancock will have more than fourteen hundred regulars at Fort Larned. That's a big enough force to handle the situation, I should think."

Once outside of the General's tent, Bearfoot Gorman exploded with disgust.

"What a great Injun fighter this Hancock must be!" he snorted. "Goin' after the tribes with artillery and infantry! Don't these army fellers ever learn nothin'?"

"They don't seem to," Bill Comstock replied.

"Seems sort of criminal to put foot soldiers to traipsin' over the plains," Sharp Grover commented. "There ain't nobody more helpless than a man set down on foot on the prairie. If it comes to fightin', the Injuns will run circles around poor old Hancock!"

"It'll come to fighting, too," Cameron predicted. "Roman Nose won't sign any treaties, and he won't abide by anything the chiefs sign. The only way to whip Roman Nose into line is to beat him in battle, and fellers like Hancock aren't going to do it with infantry!"

"You're right," Comstock agreed. "It's going to take some kind of special force to beat Roman Nose."

The scouts felt a little bit like men being led to the slaughter, but there was no help for it, so Cameron, Comstock, Grover and Bearfoot rode out ahead of Custer the next morning when the Seventh started for Fort Larned.

THE march to Larned proved uneventful, and when the column trotted into the little military post they found it teeming with soldiers and excitement. Custer hurried to Hancock's headquarters, and presently a trooper came in search of Cameron, saying that he was wanted by the two generals.

Cameron found General Custer seated at a plain wooden table, facing General Hancock. At the other two sides of the table sat two Indian warriors whom Cameron immediately recognized as Tall Bull and White Horse.

After Cameron had been introduced to General Hancock, Custer said:

"I sent for you because you know these Indians, and can talk to them in their own language. Who are they, and what influence do they wield?"

"They are Tall Bull and White Horse," Cameron replied, indicating each Indian in turn. "They are chiefs of the Dog Soldiers, and great friends of Roman Nose. They have a lot of influence with the Dog Soldiers, but not so much with the tribal council of chiefs. Any talking they do, General, remember they are speaking only for the Dog Soldiers."

"Ask them why they came here," Custer suggested.

Knowing Indian nature as he did, Cameron had more sense than to put the question bluntly.

"The great white chiefs are glad to see my friends," he said to Tall Bull and White Horse. "They are honored to be visited by such mighty war chiefs."

"We were glad to come," White Horse replied. "We wanted to tell the white chiefs that all the Indians are coming in to council."

"Is Roman Nose coming in?" Cameron asked.

"It may be," Tall Bull replied, somewhat uncomfortably. "We cannot speak for Roman Nose. But he is very angry with the whites."

When this had been translated into English, General Hancock's face reddened with anger, and he pounded his fist on the table, shouting at Cameron.

"Tell them to give us honest answers, or I'll have them arrested!"

"You won't get anywhere with them that way!" Joe Cameron said, bluntly. "When you council with Indians, you do it their way, or they won't talk at all. Have these chiefs been fed? Has the pipe been smoked?"

"Of course not!" Hancock snorted. "I've no time for such foolish nonsense!"

"Cameron is right, General," Custer interposed.

"Well, have it your own way." Hancock shrugged, his anger evaporating. "Do whatever is necessary to make these foul-smelling devils talk."

"Come, my friends," Cameron said to White Horse and Tall Bull. "We will feast and smoke before going to the council fire."

Custer ordered meat to be cooked, and soon the two chiefs were seated cross-legged on the ground, contentedly devouring huge quantities of food. When so stuffed they could scarcely move, they smoked their pipes for half an hour before beginning to talk.

Meanwhile, soldiers had been set to gathering wood, and a large council fire had been lighted. Here gathered all the officers of the fort, and White Horse and Tall Bull were much impressed by the full-dress uniforms which Custer had ordered each officer to don for the occasion.

Finally, the chiefs announced that they were ready to council, and Cameron took them to the big fire. Hancock opened the council with a short speech in which he explained that he did not come to make war, but to make peace. However, he added, if the Indians wanted war, then he was ready for them, but he hoped that there would be no fighting.

At the conclusion of Hancock's talk, Tall Bull stood up and replied at great length. His was a long, rambling, pointless speech, and he alluded to the growing scarcity of game. He explained that he had always been a great friend of the white man.

Of course, he admitted, there were a few bad Indians around, and these the chiefs had difficulty in controlling. He stated further that the chiefs of the Cheyenne and of the Sioux had started to come into Fort Larned, but had encountered a large herd of buffalo on the way. Because buffalo had been scarce here lately, they could not pass up the opportunity to kill fresh meat. This had delayed them seriously, and it might be some days yet before all of the chiefs arrived to make talk with Hancock.

AFTER Cameron had translated this for the benefit of the white officers, General Hancock said:

"Tell them that we understand their

need to hunt, and that tomorrow morning we will start up the Pawnee Fork and will meet the chiefs wherever the Indians are camped. They need not come here. We will go to them, in order not to interrupt their hunting."

When Tall Bull and White Horse had been told what Hancock had said, they expressed alarm.

"Such a large body of white soldiers moving toward the camp will frighten the Indians," Tall Bull explained. "They will be afraid of an attack. But we will return to camp and tell the chiefs what the great white war chief has said."

This concluded the council, and Tall Bull and White Horse rode away.

True to his word, Hancock set forth the next morning, shortly after sunrise. The infantry slogged slowly along, with the artillery trailing behind, while up ahead, Custer and the Seventh kicked up clouds of dust for the following soldiers to swallow.

Cameron and Comstock were riding perhaps a mile in front of the cavalry, for Custer feared an ambush.

"If we ain't ridin' into a trap, I'll eat my hat!" Comstock remarked.

"Maybe so," Cameron shrugged. "But, as Custer said, we have enough men to handle any emergency."

Shortly before noon, they spotted a dust on the trail upstream, and presently a lone Indian came riding along. When he saw Cameron and Comstock, he pressed on toward them, holding his right hand up in the peace sign.

It proved to be Bull Bear, an influential chief of the Dog Soldiers. He bore word that the chiefs were coming to meet Hancock. But, he said, it would be some time before the chiefs could arrive.

Cameron took Bull Bear back to talk with Hancock and Custer. Hancock wanted to know why it would take the chiefs a long time to come downstream to meet him, and Bull Bear gave an evasive answer.

"It's their delaying tactics, General," Cameron suggested. "Mebby they're moving camp, and want to stall for time until the women and children get clear out of the country."

"Tell Bull Bear that I shall press forward until I overtake the village, even if it moves," Hancock directed. "Say that we will camp out of sight of the lodges, so as not to alarm the people, and the chiefs can then come into our camp for council."

Bull Bear agreed to this, somewhat reluctantly, and galloped back off upstream to carry the word to the waiting chiefs.

"Bull Bear was lying," Cameron told Comstock. "The chiefs aren't far away. Did you notice that Bull Bear was running his pony hard when we first saw him, yet that horse wasn't sweaty, and he wasn't blowin' much. He hadn't traveled far."

"You're right," Comstock agreed. "And the way Bull Bear tore out of here, he ain't got far to go to get back. Nobody rides a hoss at a dead run when he's startin' out on a long trip!"

"Keep your eyes open, Bill," Cameron advised, as they once more rode out ahead of the cavalry. "We may meet the warriors over the next ridge!"

But it was midafternon before the two scouts sighted a large body of warriors, drawn up in imposing battle array, quietly sitting their horses as they waited for the white soldiers to arrive.

CHAPTER VI

"This is no time to kill!"

ABOUT one thousand warriors sat their horses in that immobile line of fighting men. Faces were bedaubed with war paint, covers had been stripped from shields. Lancer bedecked with feathers fluttered on high. Bow strings were strung and quivers were filled with arrows. In addition, most of the warriors were armed with rifles or revolvers, or both.

When General Hancock saw this wild, fantastic battle array, he ordered infantry, cavalry, and artillery to deploy in line of skirmishers. The cavalry galloped into line of battle, bright sabres flashing in the sun. Then the line halted, and a strange quiet settled over the prairie as warrior and soldier paused, each staring at the other's formidable array.

Suddenly out of the Indian line of battle rode Roman Nose, bearing a white flag tied to a willow pole. With him came the Cheyenne chiefs Medicine Wolf, White Horse, Bull Bear, and Gray Beard, together with the Sioux chiefs, Pawnee Killer, Bad Wound, Tall-Bear-That-Walks-Under-Ground, Little Bear, Little Bull, and Left Hand.

Seeing the white flag borne by Roman Nose, Generals Hancock and Custer rode forward to meet the chiefs, accompanied by Cameron, Comstock, Grover, and Bearfoot Gorman.

Speaking through Cameron, who acted as interpreter, General Hancock demanded of the chiefs why they came forward backed by such a hostile display of warriors. He asked if they desired war, and informed them that if they did, he was ready to give it to them.

Roman Nose, still clutching the white flag, rode close to Cameron.

"Friend," he said, "tell the great white chief that we do not want to fight at this time. If we had wanted war just now we should not have come out into the open to face such a large body of troops."

When this had been relayed to Hancock, he told Cameron to ask Roman Nose why he had not come to the council with Tall Bull and White Horse. Roman Nose sneered openly.

"Tell the fool that I could not come because my ponies are too thin and weak to travel!" he said with a laugh. The fine, fat, slick prairie horse he bestrode danced under him impatiently.

Roman Nose turned to Tall Bull and thrust the white flag into his hands.

"Here, you hold this!" he said. "So that I can kill this man Hancock, as I have promised to do!"

Joe Cameron jumped his horse forward and grasped Roman Nose by the arm.

"Friend!" he cried. "Do nothing foolish! This is the white chief who comes straight from the Great White Father in Washington! If harm is done to him, there will be war forever, and all the lodges of the Cheyennes will be destroyed!"

"He is right, Roman Nose," Tall Bull said. "This is no time to kill the white chief!"

"All right," Roman Nose replied, after a moment of hesitation. "You say so, and I listen. Give me back the white flag before I kill this man. While I hold the flag of truce I cannot violate it, so give it back to me before I do something violent!"

Roman Nose clutched the white flag with both hands and stared insolently at Hancock.

"Tell this man, if he is a man, that he does not know how close to death he has come today!" Roman Nose sneered. "Tell him to take his soldiers and go away!"

"Tell Roman Nose," Hancock countered, "that I shall continue my march to his village. I shall camp within sight of the lodges, and I shall expect the chiefs to come to my headquarters tent and hold council with me!"

When this had been relayed to Roman Nose, he backed his horse away to consult with the chiefs. Finally, Tall Bull rode forward to announce that the chiefs had accepted this arrangement, and that Hancock and his troops were free to march toward the village.

The chiefs then wheeled their ponies and rejoined the line of watching warriors, whereupon the whole body of Indians galloped off to the northwest and soon disappeared over the ridges. Hancock ordered the troops to resume marching.

AFTER a short march, the column came within sight of the Indian village. Something over four hundred lodges stood on a flat plain that ended in a sharp-rising bluff.

Hancock halted his command and ordered that camp be pitched. The soldiers had no sooner erected their tents than Roman Nose, accompanied by Gray Beard, Medicine Wolf, and Bull Bear, rode in to inform Hancock that the Cheyenne women and children were fleeing from the village.

"Have the chiefs bring them back," Hancock ordered.

Roman Nose laughed when Cameron translated this to him.

"Tell the white chief that if he wants to get the people back, he had better go and round them up himself!" the huge warrior said, as he and his three companions wheeled and rode away.

It was growing dark by this time, and the tired soldiers, having eaten a hastily-prepared meal, were rolling in their blankets for the night's sleep. Cameron and his fellow scouts, scorning army tents, slept on the open prairie.

Cameron had been asleep for perhaps two hours when he was awakened by General Custer.

"I want you to come with me," Custer explained, as Cameron walked with him among the tents. "General Hancock has ordered me to take the Seventh cavalry and surround the Indian village so that the Cheyennes cannot get away during the night. I've aroused the officers, and the sergeants are awakening the men."

"You're wasting your time, General," Cameron told him. "The women and children were fleeing this afternoon, and if the warriors aim to get away, they've already left."

"Can't help it!" Custer insisted. "Hancock orders it! I wish they'd leave Indian fighting to those who understand something about it. But they won't, so here we go on another wild goose chase!"

Cameron was amazed at how quietly trained regular soldiers could muster their forces in the middle of the night. In no time at all, the Seventh cavalry was mounted and ready to ride.

Just as the regiment was about to leave, Hancock came riding through the moonlight.

"I've ordered the infantry and artillery under arms," he told Custer. "If you have any trouble, sound a trumpet, and we'll hurry out to your help. But I don't anticipate a fight."

"If the Indians are still there, we'll have a fight all right!" Cameron predicted, as the Seventh moved slowly forward, walking their horses over the moonlit prairie. All conversation had been forbidden. Each man held his sabre tightly against his side to prevent the clink and rattle of scabbard and chains, and the walking horses made scarcely any sound in the tall prairie grass. The only noise was the occasional tinkle of a bridle chain, or the soft snort of a sleepy horse.

The Indian lodges showed ahead, looming ghostly white in the moonlight. Were all the people asleep, Cameron wondered, or had everyone fled? The village was unnaturally silent; either the inhabitants had left, or the warriors

[*Turn page*]

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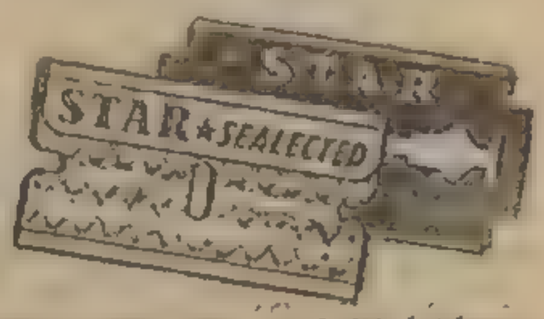

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were lying in ambush, watching the approach of the troops and waiting for the moment to open fire.

When within one hundred yards of the village, Custer called a halt, and the troopers dismounted, each man holding his horse by the nostrils to prevent it from whinnying.

"Call out to them, Cameron," Custer ordered. "Tell them that we do not want trouble, but that we have been ordered to guard them until morning."

Joe Cameron shouted loudly in the Cheyenne language, calling first upon Roman Nose, and then upon others of the leading men. No answer came back from the silent lodges, except the excited barking of one or two dogs.

"The Indians must be there," Custer surmised, "or the dogs would be gone."

"I don't know," Cameron pointed out, "some of the dogs around an Indian camp are more than half wild, and won't follow the people."

CUSTER, always a man of sudden and reckless decisions, chose his course of action promptly.

"Cameron, come with me," he ordered. "The troops will stay where they are, while you and I creep into the village and find out for ourselves how many Indians are there!"

Crawling cautiously on hands and knees. Cameron and Custer made their way quietly to within a few yards of the nearest lodges, but still no sound broke the quiet of the prairie night. Even the dogs were silent now, for they had slunk away at the unwelcome approach of white men.

"There's nobody here, General," Cameron said, finally. "The Cheyennes pulled up and beat it. They'll be miles from here by daylight!"

"General Hancock isn't going to like this!" Custer replied, ruefully. "We'll search the village and see what we can find."

Calling up the Seventh, Custer set the soldiers to work searching the lodges. When this had been completed, all reports agreed that not a single human being was left in camp.

When the escape of the Cheyennes was reported to Hancock, he ordered a few companies of infantry to occupy the camp and guard the lodges until it was decided what to do with them. He then ordered General Custer to take the Seventh cavalry and go in pursuit of the savages. Custer took Cameron and Bearfoot along to act as scouts and guides.

"You aren't going to catch up with them, General," Cameron predicted. "Everything is against us. There was a heavy frost last night, and it's completely covered most of the tracks. After the Indians get out a ways on the plains, they'll quit traveling in a bunch, and break up into thirty-forty small parties, each headed in a different direction."

Subsequent events proved that Cameron had been right.

Things were quiet for several days, and no report came in as to the whereabouts of the Cheyennes. When news of them did come, it was bad news.

It seemed that the Cheyennes had gone whooping off down along the Solomon and Saline rivers, burning and pillaging as they went. They plundered five settlements, killed and scalped fifteen white people, and drove off ten head of stock. It was reported by the survivors of these raids that the Indians had been well armed.

"Of course, they're well armed!" General Custer cried. "Major Anthony, the Indian agent, has just issued them one hundred pistols, eighty Lancaster rifles, twelve bags of powder, one and one half kegs of lead, and fifteen thousand percussion caps!"

"Reckon the Indian Bureau will never learn!" Joe Cameron commented. "What do we do next? Chase the Cheyennes some more?"

"Not just yet," Custer replied. "We're ordered back to Fort Wallace. General Sheridan will meet us there and formulate plans for the next action."

The trip back to Fort Wallace passed without incident. Cameron and Bearfoot picked up three old Indian trails all headed toward the northwest.

"They're making for the sand hills of eastern Colorado," Cameron guessed. "That's wild and desolate country, without much water to speak of, and it'll be difficult for cavalry to follow them."

"But they'll need to be followed," General Custer sighed. "And I bet I know who is to follow them!"

CHAPTER VII

Enemy Forever!

ON reaching Fort Wallace, Cameron and Bearfoot Gorman learned that Bill Comstock and Sharp Grover had gone to Fort Hayes with Bill Cody.

But a day or so later, Comstock and Grover rode into the fort.

"Howdy, Buffalo Bill!" Bearfoot greeted Comstock.

"You ain't to call me that no more," Comstock said with a grin. "I done lost my title!"

"How come?" Bearfoot snorted. "Mean to tell me you let them army folks persuade you Cody is the one and only Buffalo Bill?"

"Army folks didn't persuade me," Comstock replied. "Bill Cody did!"

"Stop talkin' riddles!" Bearfoot shouted. "And tell us what happened."

"Let Sharp tell you," Comstock suggested, as he strode away.

"Big doin's while you was gone," Sharp commented. "Biggest buffalo hunt ever pulled off!

"The officers down to Fort Hayes said they was plumb tired of hearin' folks argue who should be called 'Buffalo Bill.' Army and railroad people insisted Cody was the only real Buffalo Bill, but all the old-timers claimed Comstock had the title first and should be allowed to keep it.

"One night they was a free-for-all fight between troopers and buckskin men, and several fellers was bad hurt. So the officers says they'll put a stop to this here nonsense by stagin' an all-day buffalo hunt between Cody and Comstock. The one that runs down an' kills the most buffalo gets called Buffalo Bill, and the loser, he goes back to bein' known as just plain Bill.

"Well, sir," Grover went on, "Comstock and Cody don't cotton much to the idea, but the officers says it's got to be done, so they goes through with it. You should have heard the men placin' bets! I don't doubt but what thousands an' thousands o' dollars changed hands!

"The officers sets a day, and when it comes, everybody goes out on the prairie lookin' for buffalo. All the troops and all the railroad workers are along, and even the ladies, ridin' in buggies, and holdin' silly-looking parasols to keep the sun off their heads!

"It was a bad day for us old-timers," Grover admitted, a bit ruefully. "Cody wins hands down! In the the morning runnin', Cody kills thirty-eight buffalo, and Comstock gets only twenty-three.

"After dinner, another herd is sighted, and the two hunters goes at it again. Cody kills eighteen to Comstock's fourteen. Before long, still another herd comes over the ridges, and this time, Cody pulls quite a stunt. He takes the saddle and bridle off his hoss and goes after them buffalo bareback!

"Again, he kills more buffalo than Comstock can get! So that settled it. When the score was all tallied up, Cody has run down and killed sixty-nine buffalo, to forty-eight for Comstock.

"Everybody agrees that now there ain't but one feller who's entitled to be called 'Buffalo Bill,' an' that's young Cody!"

"How does Comstock feel about it?" Bearfoot asked.

"He pretends he don't care one way or the other," Sharp Grover replied, "but I think he's takin' it kind of hard. He was real proud of that title, Comstock was, and he don't relish having it taken away from him by a young feller."

"Yeah," said Bearfoot Gorman, "but us old-timers got to get used to the fact

that these young fellers comin' up is better than we are. And that's good, too. If each risin' generation of men ain't better than its pappies, why there's no progress in this here world!"

"Some philosopher you are!" Sharp Grover growled. "But I reckon you're right, at that!"

There wasn't too much time to philosophize and speculate, for word came that a certain General Palmer, in command at Fort Ellsworth, had succeeded in getting Roman Nose to agree to come in for a council.

This electrifying news sent Joe Cameron and Bearfoot Gorman racing over the prairie in the direction of Fort Ellsworth.

"Get down and sit in on the council," Custer directed Cameron. "Palmer will need a good interpreter, and even if he already has his own, you sit in and listen to everything that's said, so we can report to General Sheridan. Take Bearfoot with you, but I'll need Comstock and Grover here with me."

When Cameron and Bearfoot reached Fort Ellsworth, the Indians had already arrived for the council. Black Kettle was there with a retinue of wives, a few young braves, and a man named Big Head, a warrior of great influence with the fighting men.

The women had pitched a few lodges, and already the vicinity was beginning to take on the horrifying odor of an Indian encampment, as Joe Cameron made his way among the fires looking for Roman Nose.

He found the big warrior seated on the ground, talking with Black Kettle and Big Head.

"Ho, friend!" Roman Nose greeted the white man. "Sit down with us; the feasting is about to begin."

Joe sat down beside Roman Nose, nodding soberly to Black Kettle and Big Head. Since the ceremonies had not started, the Indians were smoking short-stemmed, everyday pipes, and Cameron built a cigarette.

Two fat steers had been killed and barbecued. Much bread, coffee, and sugar had been lugged out of the fort's commissary, and presently the women began to serve great chunks of hot, steaming meat. The Indians ate with gusto, and with much smacking of lips, licking of fingers, and loud chewing.

No white man could hope to keep up with Indian warriors at a feast, so after eating as much of the meat as he could hold, Cameron left the circle. Scarcely a word had been spoken, and he knew that the Indians would not talk until their appetites had been satisfied.

Roman Nose, Black Kettle and Big Head sat around the better part of that day, gorging themselves on the white man's food. Finally, Black Kettle announced that he was ready to talk.

In spite of the fact that this was a small council, extensive preparations had been made to impress the Indians. A huge army tent had been erected, and now a large council fire was lighted in its center. To the fireside came General Palmer and his officers, in dress uniform; Bearfoot Gorman and Joe Cameron, as well as the leading men of the Cheyenne Nation.

After the pipe had been passed, Black Kettle arose to speak. Joe Cameron asked him to speak slowly, and to pause after each sentence so that Joe could translate to General Palmer as the speech progressed.

Black Kettle solemnly delivered himself of the stereotyped drivel that had become the standard speech of the Indian chief. He was a great friend of the white man. He had always been a great friend of the white man. Some Cheyennes had engaged in raids on the white man, but not Black Kettle. He craved peace!

Black Kettle droned on, advancing the customary run-of-the-mine arguments about honest, well-meaning, peace-loving Indians being shoved around by brutal, treacherous white frontiersmen. He concluded with a rather lame request that his good friends, the white men, discontinue building the railroad.

As Black Kettle concluded his whining chant, Roman Nose sprang impatiently into the space separating the Indians from the military officers. The

huge war leader's action had been so angry and impetuous, that Joe Cameron and one of the officers instinctively reached for revolvers, thinking that Roman Nose meant to attack General Palmer.

"Easy, friend!" Cameron cautioned. "This is no place to fight!"

ROMAN NOSE'S usually handsome face twisted into a sneer.

"I did not come here to fight," he said. "For once, Roman Nose, the fighter, wants to talk!"

Then, recalling the solemn etiquette of such occasions, Roman Nose composed his features, wrapped his robe tightly about his huge chest, slowly raised his right hand and began the famous speech that ended all hope of peace.

"I am Wookinih, whom the whites call Roman Nose. I am not a chief, and cannot speak for the people, as Black Kettle can. But I can speak for the Dog Soldiers. The warriors will do as I say!

"And now I say that never before have I held out my hand to the white man in friendship. And, if the railroad is continued, I shall be the white man's enemy forever!

"I am a bitter foe, but can be a strong friend as well. It is for the white chief to decide which part Roman Nose shall play!

"The Iron Horse must stop. I tell you that the track must not be built one foot beyond where it now ends. That place which the whites call End of Track must be End of Track for all time! If End of Track moves one foot toward the Shining Mountains, there will be war!

"It is better to die fighting than to see our women and children starve. Others may sign treaties, but Roman Nose will be the white man's enemy forever!"

As Roman Nose sat down, there was utter silence in the tent. Gone was all hope of peace. Now it didn't matter what Black Kettle might say or sign; Roman Nose had committed the fighting men to war.

Black Kettle was so angry at Roman Nose that he arose and stalked out of the tent, followed by a few of the young braves. Big Head remained stolidly in his place, signifying approval of the things that Roman Nose had said.

Black Kettle's rude and insulting disregard of the formalities of a ceremonious council fire disrupted the meeting. General Palmer abruptly declared the council at an end, and he and his officers left the tent. Joe Cameron looked at Roman Nose and slowly shook his head.

"You have done a wrong thing, my friend," he told the big warrior. "It is bad! The railroad will be continued, and you will be crushed beneath its iron wheels."

"All right!" Roman Nose replied. "I can take care of myself on the war trail! The powers of my magic war bonnet are great!"

Roman Nose strode toward the door of the tent, followed by Big Head. At the door, Roman Nose turned a moment.

"My friend," he said to Cameron, "you are the only white man after this day who will be welcome at the fires of the Dog Soldiers!"

"So that's that!" Bearfoot Gorman grunted. "Reckon we might as well get on back to Fort Wallace an' tell Custer about it."

"You're right," Joe Cameron agreed. "Let's find General Palmer and see if he wants anything before we start home."

General Palmer was disconsolate. He had been hoping against his better judgment that something good would come of the council with Roman Nose. Now he was in the mood of a man who has made a last desperate effort and has seen that effort fail.

"It's all over," the General admitted. "There will be no peace on the prairie now. If you men are going back to Wallace, I wish you'd carry some dispatches to General Custer."

While General Palmer was preparing his written report to Custer which, of course, was to be forwarded to Sheridan and Sherman, Joe Cameron and Bearfoot saddled fresh horses and led them around to the door of headquarters. After an hour or so, an orderly

brought out the dispatches, and the two scouts mounted and headed back toward Fort Wallace.

"Golly," said Bearfoot Gorman, "Roman Nose sure made a tough, fightin' speech! Comin' from anybody else, I'd discount it some, but Roman Nose not only *talks* tough, he *is* tough!

"'Course," Bearfoot continued, "I knowed for some time that Roman Nose was tyin' scalp loops, and paintin' his face, and layin' out in the weeds for white men. But how come he goes on the war stake all at once?"

"He never did like Black Kettle," Cameron explained. "You see, Black Kettle used to be a pretty tough fighter himself, and always was raiding the settlements. But when the Colorado boys destroyed his village an' killed five or six hundred of his people at Sand Creek, Black Kettle got the fright of his life. He's talked friendly to the whites ever since. That one battle gave him religion over night.

"Ever since Sand Creek, Black Kettle really has been working for peace. And Roman Nose thinks he's a coward who quit the first time he got badly licked. So when Roman Nose heard Black Kettle talking all that drivel to the whites, he lost his temper."

"What do you reckon will happen now?" Bearfoot asked.

"I suppose Black Kettle will take his Southern Cheyenne lodges and go back to Oklahoma with whatever braves, women, children and old people will follow him. Most of the fighting men will stick with Roman Nose."

"And Roman Nose will go on attackin' the railroad," Bearfoot added. "And the army will go on chasin' Roman Nose! Looks like you and I are goin' to be right busy!"

LOOK FORWARD TO

WILD HORSE RANGE

A New Complete Action Novel

By

B. M. BOWER

COMING NEXT ISSUE

CHAPTER VIII

A Voice on the Prairie

TWO days after Cameron and Gorman reported back to Custer, General Sheridan arrived at Fort Wallace in an army ambulance. As soon as a large headquarters tent had been erected, Fighting Phil summoned the officers and scouts to attend a council of war.

"Something has got to be done about Roman Nose!" Sheridan stated, bluntly. "I want ideas! What about a winter campaign?"

"You mean send troops out onto the plains after the Injuns in the winter time?" Bill Comstock demanded.

"That's exactly what I mean!" said Fighting Phil.

"It won't work, sir," Comstock declared. "The snow gets deep on the prairie, the grass is covered under, and there ain't no forage for the hosses. The Injuns themselves never go on the war trail in winter time. Their ponies git too thin to travel."

"Then why wouldn't that be a good time to seek out their camp and attack them?" General Sheridan wondered.

"You'll have no grass for your hosses!" Comstock repeated. "You can't tote enough hay an' grain around with you to feed a thousand cavalry hosses for two-three months!"

"Maybe you're right," Sheridan admitted. "I talked about this with old Jim Bridger, and he says the same thing you do. What do you think, Cameron?"

"I think it might be done, General," Joe Cameron replied. "We could locate the Cheyenne camp for you, and come back and tell you where it is. Then you could ship your men and horses by rail to the nearest railroad station. From there, maybe you could carry enough feed for the horses.

"You see, General, the trouble with trying to fight Indians in the winter

time is that you spend so much time looking for them. If the scouts could locate their camp for you, so you could go directly to it, you might not have to be out on the plains for very long!"

"By Jove, Cameron, I believe it would work, at that!" Sheridan exclaimed. "Custer, we'll try it this winter! You scouts can find the Cheyenne camp, can't you?"

"Sure can," Comstock nodded, "an' it might work. But you'll be takin' an awful chance of losin' your hosses, an' mebbe a lot of your men from cold, hunger, an' exhaustion!"

"A soldier's business is to take chances!" Sheridan grunted. "So we'll try it. This winter, just as soon as the weather is bad, we'll start.

"Begin to plan on it, Custer! Bill Cody thinks it might work. I discussed it with him at Fort Lyon last month. And by the way, those of you who know Cody will be glad to hear that he's been made Chief of Scouts of the Fifth Cavalry."

"Good!" Comstock nodded. "Cody's one of the best scouts on the plains. An' a pretty fair-to-middlin' buffalo hunter, too!" he added, amid a general laugh from the officers and scouts.

"Well, we'll try this winter campaign," Sheridan continued. "But meanwhile, we'll have to figure out something else to do. Here it is only July, and the whole frontier is demanding that we do something to stop Roman Nose and his raids. We can't wait until winter; we must take some action immediately."

"General," Joe Cameron began, "if you'd raise a special force of scouts, I believe we could stop Roman Nose."

"Special force of scouts?" Sheridan asked. "How do you mean?"

"I mean, recruit for special service a whole troop of buckskin men," Cameron explained. "Scouts, trappers, guides, mountain men, hunters an' such; any kind of man who has lived on the plains or with the Indians, and who knows Indian ways and warfare."

"Good idea," Sheridan agreed. "But I can't do it. There's no authority for recruiting new troops in either the Regular or the Volunteer service at this time. Nor is there any money appropriated to outfit such a troop."

"Perhaps the Commissary Department could do it," General Custer suggested.

"Of course they could!" Sheridan cried. "The Commissary people always have funds for the hiring of civilian guides, teamsters, and cooks. How many scouts would we have to recruit?"

"I'd say fifty was enough," Cameron suggested, and Comstock nodded agreement.

FOR a moment the general stared at Cameron in amazement.

"Fifty!" Sheridan snorted. "What could you do with fifty men?"

"We could do plenty," Cameron replied. "With fifty of the kind of men *I* mean!"

"Sure could!" Bearfoot Gorman agreed. "Men like Comstock, an' Grover, an' Pueblo Jones, an' Cameron, an' me! Why, shucks, General, fifty men like us are better than a whole regiment of cavalry!"

The officers laughed at Bearfoot's lack of modesty, but the laugh was a rueful one, for they knew that there was a great deal of truth in what Gorman said. To date, the record of the cavalry was not one of which any soldier was particularly proud.

"Take fifty men like that an' put 'em under a couple of officers who understand how to run such an outfit, an' they'll do more Injun fightin' in a month than you can shake a stick at!" Bill Comstock declared.

"And I know the very man for the job!" General Sheridan exclaimed. "Colonel Forsyth, old Sandy Forsyth! He's been after me to give him an active command in the field."

"He'll do fine!" Comstock agreed, and the other scouts nodded eagerly. "Sandy's okay; a real plainsman, for an army officer, that is!"

"All right," General Sheridan said. "I'll see if Colonel Forsyth will accept the command. He can pick his own lieutenant. You boys have any suggestions who the second in command might be?"

"How about that young Lieutenant Beecher?" Comstock asked. "He knows Injun fightin' pretty well for a feller who ain't been west very long."

"Good! I'll suggest his name to Forsyth, although I want Sandy to choose his own officers and men," Sheridan replied. "But where can you recruit fifty good scouts? Surely you'll not depend on the long-haired Petes and Toms who hang around the forts bragging about all the Indians they've killed?"

"'Course not!" Comstock snorted. "We're talkin' about *real* scouts; men like Bill Cody, an' Bill Hickok, an' Guerrier, an' Farley, an' Charley Reynolds, an' California Joe, an' fellers such as them."

"Cody can't go with you," Sheridan said. "He'll have to stay with the Fifth. And I believe Hickok has gone back east."

"Leave it to us, General," Joe Cameron suggested. "Give Comstock an' Grover an' Bearfoot an' me authority to recruit a company of fifty scouts, an' we'll get the men for you, all right!"

"You have the authority right now," General Sheridan declared. "But wait until I get in touch with Colonel Forsyth before you begin."

"That suits us fine, Gin'ral," Bill Comstock stated. "I'd like to take some of the scouts out to my place for a few days, to round up my hosses. They been turned out to grass with nobody to guard 'em, and mebbe the Injuns has run 'em off for all I know. They's nigh onto a hundred head of good ponies out there. An' before we get busy raisin' this troop of scouts, I'd like to get the hosses an' run 'em in to the protection of the fort."

"All right, go ahead," Sheridan agreed. "Report back here to me one week from today. Forsyth should be here by that time."

An hour later, Cameron, Bearfoot, Grover and Comstock were riding over the prairie toward Comstock's cabin, some five miles out of Fort Wallace. They found the place in good order, and apparently no Indians had been around. The sod house and the pole corrals were undamaged. There was, of course, no sign of the horses, for the animals had scattered far and wide over the prairie.

THE next week was spent in riding up the horses and driving them down to the pole corrals. The first two days the men worked close to home, spending the nights at the sod cabin, but on the morning of the third day, Comstock announced that since the horses which remained at large were apparently a long ways out on the plains, there would not be time to get out and back in one day.

"We'd best split up into pairs an' camp out for a night or two," Comstock decided. "Grover an' I will head southwest this mornin', and Cameron an' Bearfoot better go northwest. Round up what hosses you find an' start 'em back toward the ranch.

"This here is likely to be dangerous work," Comstock went on. "Don't anybody take fool chances. Two men drivin' a lot of hosses will raise a considerable dust, an' if the Injuns see that dust, they'll come investigatin'.

"Don't get ideas that you got to die fightin' for my hosses. If Injuns take out after you, just go skalleyhootin' for home, an' leave the Injuns have the hosses."

Before a start could be made that morning, the horses that had been corralled had to be let out and guarded while they grazed for two hours. When they had eaten their fill of the long prairie grass, they were herded back into the corral.

"Ain't they goin' to get a mite hungry before we come back?" Bearfoot wondered.

"Yeah, but it can't be helped," Comstock pointed out. "They've et enough to hold 'em for a while. We'd best camp out tonight, an' plan to be back here tomorrow evenin'. That-a-way, the hosses won't go long enough without eatin' to hurt 'em none."

Comstock had dismounted to close the heavy corral gate. As he put foot to stirrup and swung into the saddle, the stirrup leather broke. Comstock

clung to the horn, saving himself from a bad fall as his half-broken mount shied violently.

"Doggone it!" Comstock exclaimed as he picked the stirrup up from the ground and examined the damage to his saddle. "Take me an hour to splice that stirrup leather together. Looks like I never will get started this mornin'!"

"Look," Cameron suggested, "take my saddle. You got further to go than Bearfoot or I. Put my saddle on your hoss, an' I'll mend your stirrup leather an' use your hull today. That way, you can get started."

"Best way, I reckon," Comstock agreed, as he began to uncinch his saddle. After Cameron's saddle was on Comstock's horse and Bill had mounted, the chief scout said:

"There's scrap leather, punches an' awls an' stuff in the cabin."

"I'll find 'em," Cameron replied, as Comstock and Sharp Grover rode away to the southwest. Watching them disappear over the ridges, Bearfoot Gorman shook his head.

"Seems funny to me that Comstock allus takes Grover with him," the old scout muttered, "an' them two fellers hatin' each other the way they do. Looks like Comstock would take me with him, an' let you go with Grover, don't it?"

"Yeah," Cameron agreed. "I used to think you just imagined that those two didn't like each other, but this trip, it does seem as if I can sort of feel their hatred. Something is irritating Grover, all right. He acts like a bear with a sore nose!"

"Grover just plumb hates Comstock," Bearfoot replied. "But Bill is such an honest an' sincere feller that he keeps Grover around on account of he knows he's the best scout in these parts, exceptin' mebbe Bill Cody, and of course, Pueblo Jones, only he's dead."

"Did those two ever have a fight?" Cameron asked.

"Not that I know of," Bearfoot admitted. "They argue somethin' fierce from time to time, but they never came to blows, I reckon. But some day there's bound to be real trouble!"

AS Joe Cameron sat cross-legged on the ground, busily repairing Comstock's saddle, he looked up suddenly at Bearfoot.

"Hey!" he said, sewing awl poised in mid-air. "I forgot to take my possible sack off my saddle. Bill's gone off with it!"

Bearfoot laughed, "He'll bring it back. Nothin' in there you'll be needin' for a day or two, is there?"

"Guess not," Cameron grunted. "Only thing is, the receipt for my gold is in that possible sack!"

"Forget it," Bearfoot chided. "Bill ain't goin' to steal your receipt!"

"'Course not!" Cameron replied, as he resumed stitching. "Hope he doesn't lose it, that's all!"

After repairing the saddle, Cameron put the tools back where he had found them. A moment later, he and Bearfoot were riding away from the ranch in a northwesterly direction.

They rode all day without catching sight of a single horse.

"Any hosses which come this way has been took up by the Injuns," Bearfoot commented, as the twilight deepened over the prairie, and they began to look for a likely place to camp.

"I guess you're right," Cameron agreed. "It will take us all day tomorrow to ride back to the cabin, an' us empty-handed. But wait a minute. Bearfoot, I smell smoke!"

"I smell it, too! A campfire, by golly!"

The sharp eyes of the two scouts searched the prairie for several minutes before they spotted a tiny wisp of blue smoke wandering listlessly out of a deep draw a half mile to the west. Without a word spoken or needed, they began to ride slowly in a circle, searching the ground for sign.

Finally they picked up the tracks of an unshod pony leading off in the direction of the fire.

"One man," said Bearfoot. "Injun or white?"

"Can't tell." Cameron shrugged. "Unshod pony might be either."

"If it's a white man campin' out here

all alone, he may need help," Bearfoot commented. "If it's an Injun, mebbe we better find out what he's up to!"

"So let's take a look-see," Cameron suggested, as they dismounted.

It was growing dark rapidly now, but it was still light enough to see a good piece over the prairie.

"Better not hobble the hosses," Cameron pointed out. "Perhaps we'll be wantin' to leave these parts in a hurry!"

CHAPTER IX

Prairie Meeting

FASTENING the ends of their nine-foot bridle reins to sagebrush roots, they moved forward, leaving their carbines in the saddle scabbards because a long gun is hard to carry when a man is crawling on all fours.

With a space of about ten feet between them, Cameron and Bearfoot began walking slowly toward the spot from which the smoke had been rising. They made not a sound as they edged along, their moccasins moving lightly over the thickly matted buffalo grass. When within a hundred yards of their destination, they dropped to all fours and began to crawl stealthily.

The moon rose suddenly over the horizon, seeming to materialize all at once, the way the moon does on the prairie. The plains were flooded with an eery silver light and, in greeting to the full moon, a coyote on a nearby ridge sent a long-drawn, quavering howl throbbing across the prairie.

The two scouts, who had sunk quietly forward onto their stomachs when the moon arose, lay still and looked at each other. Both nodded, meaning: "That howl was real, all right. Nobody, not even a Cheyenne, can imitate a coyote that well!"

The coyote did not howl again, and this fact worried Cameron. Once a coyote starts to bay the rising moon, he'll likely keep it up for a while, at least until something frightens him away. What could have frightened this particular coyote into such abrupt silence?

Bearfoot began inching noiselessly forward, and Cameron followed suit. Presently they were within a foot or two of the rim of the deep draw, and both men peered cautiously over and down into the ten-foot depression.

A tiny fire flickered so faintly that it made no more light than a match would throw. A saddle lay on the ground near a bedroll, but there was no sign of a human being.

Cameron and Bearfoot backed down the prairie slope and started crawling toward the place where they had left their horses. They needed no consultation to decide what had happened. The camper nad heard them coming and was out on the prairie, aiming either to ambush them or to run off their horses.

They dared not talk, even in whispers, as they slowly crawled and inched their way over the half mile they must cover. And even before they got there, they knew that the horses were gone!

Cameron stopped where he was, and lay still, listening. A cricket sawed loudly in the grass, and overhead, a mosquito owl cried out sharply and zoomed earthward on wings that made a rasping sound as he banked and turned. A big jackrabbit came thumping long with typical limping stride, saw the two men lying on the ground, and sped away like greased lightning.

Cameron felt cautiously for his revolver, loosening it a little bit in its holster. He knew that their horses had not worked free without human help. A sagebrush doesn't pull up easily, and is one of the best things on the prairie to tether a horse to. Somebody had untied the reins and led the horses away!

From the saddle he had seen lying beside the fire, Cameron reasoned that the somebody was a white man. Of course, he could be an Indian who had

bought or stolen a white man's saddle, but he knew that rarely, indeed, did an Indian have anything better than a crude, home-made wooden saddle covered with buffalo hide. And then there was the bedroll; no warrior used a bedroll!

The scouts dared not move, and as the two men lay there, straining to catch the slightest sound that seemed foreign to the night noises of the prairie, a booming voice called out behind them:

"By the bones of Davy Crockett, how can a man sleep with you two fellers thrashin' around on the prairie?"

Cameron turned his head slowly to look at Bearfoot, and he saw in the moonlight an expression of utter amazement on his companion's face. As Cameron watched, it seemed to him that the expression on Bearfoot's countenance slowly turned to one of superstitious fear.

"Hey, Bearfoot!" the voice called again. "Want to buy a couple of good hosses cheap?"

And now, as Bearfoot turned his face into the moonlight, Cameron saw to his astonishment that the tough old scout was crying. Big tears streamed down Bearfoot's cheeks, and he arose to his feet, choking:

"It's him! By golly, it's him!"

BEARFOOT was up and running now, back toward the draw where the little campfire had been burning. Cameron arose and followed at a walk, drawn revolver clutched in his right hand, for he had not the faintest notion of what Bearfoot was up to.

Cameron saw a tall figure rear up out of the grass and close with the running Bearfoot.

When Cameron reached the spot, Bearfoot and the tall stranger were hugging each other, slapping each other on the back, and shouting friendly curses.

"You durned old fool!" the stranger shouted. "What you doin' tryin' to get yourself killed, sneakin' up on me that-a-way in the dark?"

"Golly, I'm glad to see you!" Bearfoot was yelling, as he frankly wiped his eyes with trembling hands.

"Joe," he continued, as Cameron came up, "shake hands with Pueblo Jones!"

"Pueblo Jones?" Cameron cried in amazement. "Why, pleased to meet you! But you're supposed to be dead!"

"Dead?" Pueblo Jones replied. "Me? Not a chance! Although the Great Spirit did come mighty nigh to closin' the cases on me, come to think of it!"

"What happened?" Bearfoot demanded.

"Nothin' much," Pueblo Jones shrugged. "Had a little brush with the Shoshone, was all. But come back to my fire, an' if you're real nice, I'll let you have your hosses!"

As Pueblo walked ahead of them, Bearfoot muttered to Cameron:

"We'll never find out what happened about the Shoshone. That's the way Pueblo has always been; won't talk about himself at all!"

After they had clambered down into the draw, their host threw more dried grass on the campfire.

"Now that there's three of us instead of just me alone," he said, "reckon we can have a mite more fire."

As the little fire blazed up suddenly, Joe Cameron saw that Pueblo Jones was a grizzled old veteran, more than six feet tall, and with broad shoulders and a straight back that lightly carried his more than sixty years. A curious, old-fashioned coonskin cap perched above the long white hair that tumbled down around his shoulders. His suntanned face was like old leather, and his prominent cheek bones and high-bridged nose made him look like an old hawk.

Long handlebar mustaches lent an air of reckless bravado which Joe Cameron knew was not assumed. Pueblo's buckskin suit was fringed and beaded, and darkened by the smoke and grease of a thousand campfires.

There were mingled chagrin and admiration in Bearfoot's voice as he asked:

"What you done with our hosses, Pueblo, an' how did you get 'em?"

"Why, shucks," the famous old frontiersman replied, "it was easy. I heard you fellers comin' so I slipped out o' camp an' circled around behind you, same as anyone would do. I found your hosses, an' dark as it was, I could see them big moccasin tracks of yours. I'd know your sign anywhere, Bearfoot; there ain't another human got feet as big as yours!"

"You like to scared me to death!" Bearfoot admitted. "Me figgerin' you was dead, that-a-way. I near died myself when I heard you call. I knowed your voice, of course, an' then when you hollered: 'By the bones of Davy Crockett,' I was sure a Cheyenne had whopped me from behind an' I was in the Happy Huntin' Ground!"

"How come you to think I was dead?" Pueblo Jones demanded.

IT took quite a while to explain everything that had happened while Pueblo had been in the Northwest, and the old scout had a dozen questions that must be answered.

"I know Sandy Forsyth," Pueblo commented, after Bearfoot had brought him up to date. "A durned good man to serve under, I'd say. You fellers joinin' up?"

"Sure, we've already joined," Bearfoot told him.

"Reckon mebbe I'll join up, too," Pueblo decided, to the unfeigned delight of Bearfoot. "I ain't had any excitement in more than a year. I kind of hate to hear that Roman Nose is tyin' scalp loops an' mixin' war paint. He's a fine man, take him most times."

"That's true," Joe Cameron commented. "Only now he's sworn to fight the whites forever unless they quit building the railroad."

"Yeah. Well, I reckon the steam-cars will go through, regardless," Pueblo said with a shrug.

The three men fell silent, and Pueblo Jones stuffed and lighted a peculiarly foul smelling pipe which, as Cameron was to discover, the old man smoked most of the time. The little fire flickered and finally went out, whereupon the three men turned in for the night.

CHAPTER X

Pony Tracks

EIGHT dusty hours were spent in riding back toward Bill Comstock's cabin. When the three men reached the buildings in the late afternoon, Joe Cameron saw that Comstock and Grover had not yet arrived.

"Watch for a dust from the southwest," Bearfoot advised. "They headed down that direction, hopin' to round up some more hosses."

The sun was setting before they caught sight of a dust, but it was not the big dust they had expected.

"That ain't no hoss herd," Bearfoot commented. "Comstock an' Grover must be comin' back empty-handed, same as we did."

"It's one hoss," Pueblo Jones stated, squinting his practised eyes across the darkening prairie.

A thin pillar of dust streaked up from the ground and went drifting against the sky. At the base of the pillar, a small black dot bobbed and swayed, and presently Cameron was able to see that it was, as Pueblo had said, one horseman.

"Which is it, Joe?" Bearfoot asked. "Comstock or Grover?"

"Can't make out," Cameron admitted. "But he's sure comin' hell-for-leather!"

After a long period of watching, during which the dot grew larger and larger, Pueblo Jones finally said:

"He's wearin' a black hat!"

"That's Grover!" Cameron cried. "What you reckon happened to Comstock?"

The question went unanswered as the three men stood in the dust by the horse corral and watched the rider speed toward them, his arm rising and falling as he pounded the lathered sides of his mount.

Finally Grover whirled up to the corral and pulled his horse to a stop.

"Injuns!" he called. "The Sioux! Comin' this way!"

Then he flung himself out of the saddle, and Joe saw that the man was wounded. Sharp Grover, pale and drawn, caked with dust and sweat, was bleeding slightly from a shoulder wound.

"Comstock's dead!" he gasped. "The Sioux. They jumped us, early this morning!"

Grover sat down on the ground, nursing his wounded shoulder with one hand as he talked.

"I couldn't do nothing for Bill," he said, apologetically, looking first at Bearfoot and then at Cameron. "They were too many of 'em. Twenty bucks, I counted."

His gaze shifted, resting for a moment on Pueblo Jones; then he looked at Bearfoot.

"Who's your friend?" he asked.

"Sharp," said Bearfoot, "I takes pride in askin' you to stand up an' shake hands with Pueblo Jones!"

"Pueblo Jones!" Sharp Grover was plainly impressed. "Right glad to meet you, Pueblo. We heard tell you was dead. I'm plumb obliged to see it ain't so!"

"So am I!" Pueblo laughed, as the two scouts shook hands. "Let's take a look at your shoulder. You bad hurt?"

"Don't think so," Sharp replied. "Shoulder's cut through the flesh, is all. We camped last night within sight o' the Smoky Hill River," he explained, anxious to tell his story. "This mornin' we lit a small grass fire an' cooked meat. After we had et, we saddled up an' started back for the ranch, not havin' seen one of Bill's hosses.

"We hadn't ridden far when we saw a dust, an' here comes twenty Sioux warriors. Young fellers, they was, dressed up fit to kill, an' wearin' their war paint. Comstock an' me dismounted an' stood behind our hosses, ready to kill' em for a barricade if need be.

"The Sioux comes chargin' up, but when I gives 'em the peace sign, an' hollers at 'em in their own language, they stops actin' warlike an' comes forward for a pow-wow."

HERE Sharp paused for a moment to mop his brow with his sleeve.

"They explained they were out lookin' for white men to scalp," he continued, "but they ain't got nothin' against us. One of the young bloods is a brother of a Sioux woman I once knew for a time, an' he acts real friendly an' glad to see me again.

"I tells 'em that our idea is peace, too, an' that all we been doin' is look for Comstock's hosses. We're now headin' back for the cabin, I explains, an' they allows they'll ride along aways with us.

"We were trailin' along, trotting our horses, an' talkin' friendly with the Sioux, when half a dozen of 'em which is riding behind us, suddenly opens fire.

"They got Comstock plumb through the back, an' in the head. He falls off his hoss. Lookin' back, I sees he's done for, an' so I flails my hoss an' tries to get away from there. The Sioux chases me for five or six miles, shootin' an' hollerin'. One of 'em plugs me in the shoulder. But my hoss is out-runnin' 'em, an' after a while they gives up an' quits chasin' me.

"Late this afternoon, I saw some of 'em comin' along on my trail, mebbe seven-eight miles behind. We better rope our fresh hosses an' run 'em into Fort Wallace before the red varmints get here!"

"Reckon you're right," Bearfoot agreed. "What shall we do with Comstock's hosses, here in the corral? Think we got time to drive 'em ahead of us into the fort?"

"Not if the Sioux are only seven or eight miles behind Sharp," Cameron pointed out. "Unless, of course, we want to fight 'em."

"We could hold 'em off easy if we barricaded ourselves in the cabin," Pueblo Jones declared. "But we couldn't keep 'em from runnin' off all the hosses."

"Why don't we turn the hosses loose an' start them out into the prairie," Cameron proposed, "an' then ride for the fort. Mebby we can get Custer to come out with the Seventh an' help us drive the hosses to the fort."

"Good idea!" Pueblo Jones agreed, as

he headed for the horse corral.

"Hope the Sioux didn't take my saddle off of Comstock's horse," Joe Cameron said to Bearfoot. "But I bet they did!"

"They almost always does!" Bearfoot nodded.

"So there goes the receipt for my gold!" Cameron continued.

"Hey, that's right!" Bearfoot cried. "Never thought of it, myself. Reckon I was plumb wrong, tellin' you that Comstock would sure bring back your possible sack!"

It was the work of but a few minutes to rope out four strong, fast-seeming horses. Then the men threw the corral gate open and drove the rest of the ponies out onto the open prairie. When their saddles were on the fresh mounts, the four scouts galloped rapidly off toward Fort Wallace.

Arrived at the military post, they hurried to the headquarters tent, where they found Generals Sheridan and Custer in conference with Colonel Forsyth, who had reported for duty in response to a summons from Fighting Phil.

Grover told his story over again for the benefit of the officers, and within fifteen minutes, Cameron and the other three scouts were riding with Custer at the head of two troops of the Seventh.

They covered the four or five miles back to Comstock's cabin in a very short time. There being no signs of Indians having been in the vicinity, it was decided that Sharp Grover should lead the cavalry to the spot where Comstock had been killed.

But it was about ten o'clock at night by this time, so camp was pitched, supper fires were lighted, and the troops ate a hasty meal, after which sleep settled over the camp.

THEY were up and off again by daylight, and after a long ride, they found the body of Bill Comstock, lying beside his dead horse. Joe Cameron saw at once that his saddle was on Comstock's pony.

A quick thrill of hope shot through him. Maybe the Indians had not found the receipt for the gold!

Dismounting and bending over the body of Comstock, Cameron saw that Bill had been shot twice, once in the back of the head, and once between the shoulder blades. He had not been scalped or in any way mutilated.

Cameron had already told Custer about the switching of saddles. "Reckon I'll go through my possible sack," Joe commented, and the general nodded consent.

It didn't take long for Joe to discover that the receipt was missing. His possible sack had been looted, and while everything was in disorder, nothing was gone but the receipt.

"Doesn't look to me like the Sioux would leave a good saddle, an' take nothin' but a piece of paper which is worthless to them!" Cameron commented, looking around the sandy strip of prairie where the body lay. The ground nearby was cut up and criss-crossed with many pony tracks.

"There was twenty Sioux, like I said," Grover was explaining once more. "Looks like they done considerable ridin' around after I left. Probably ridin' in a circle, whoopin' an' hollerin' the way they do sometimes after killin' an enemy."

"Looks like it, all right," Bearfoot agreed.

Cameron said nothing. He thought he had noticed something peculiar about those pony tracks, and he walked slowly over the "battlefield," trying to verify his suspicions. Finally, he straightened up and beckoned to Bearfoot Gorman and Pueblo Jones.

As the two scouts reached him, Cameron said:

"Did you notice that these pony tracks all look alike?"

Bearfoot Gorman stared at Cameron, the light of quick suspicion in his eyes.

"What you drivin' at, Joe?" he demanded.

"Nothing, maybe," Cameron said. "Just take a look around."

Pueblo Jones was walking slowly over the ground, bent half double as

his keen eyes studied the tracks. Finally he straightened up and nodded at Cameron.

"Durned if you ain't right," he grunted. "All of these tracks was made by the same pony!"

"Sharp Grover's pony, mebbe?" Bearfoot asked in a low, hard voice.

"Don't know," Pueblo said and shrugged. "Grover changed hosses at the ranch, didn't he? An' turned the one he'd been ridin' out into the herd. Reckon we could find it again?"

"I doubt it," Cameron shook his head. "He was ridin' a small black, but they's thirty or forty small blacks in Comstock's herd. An' by now they're scattered all over the prairie."

General Custer, followed closely by Sharp Grover, came riding up.

"What do you make of it, boys?" Custer asked.

"Why, General," Bearfoot Gorman replied, "we was just puzzlin' over how come twenty warriors was all ridin' the same hoss!"

"What do you mean?" Sharp Grover blazed, reining his horse alongside Bearfoot.

"I mean," Bearfoot replied, calmly, "that it looks most suspicious like you killed Bill Comstock an' then rode your pony around in circles to make tracks like a lot of Injun warriors!"

Sharp Grover's hand streaked to his holster, but Joe Cameron swung his hat, causing Grover's horse to rear wildly. Custer spurred forward, the shoulder of his heavy cavalry mount striking Grover's horse and knocking it to its knees. Cameron grabbed Grover's leg and pulled him from the saddle. In a moment, the man was disarmed and pinioned in the strong grasp of Bearfoot Gorman and Pueblo Jones.

"Grover," General Custer snapped, "you are under arrest!"

Sharp Grover said nothing, but merely stood quietly, a sullen and stubborn expression on his surly face. Custer dismounted and studied the ground carefully.

"It does seem as though all of those tracks were made by the same pony," he admitted, finally. "But how do we know it was Grover's pony?"

"We don't," Cameron told him. "We just got suspicions."

"What do you have to say for yourself, Grover?" Custer asked.

"Same as I've said all along!" Grover replied, bluntly. "We were jumped by the Sioux. They killed Comstock, an' wounded me."

"Where's Comstock's guns?" Bearfoot wondered, casting about for some sign of the two revolvers which everyone knew the dead scout always carried. "'Course, the Injuns would carry them off, wouldn't they?"

"They would," said Pueblo Jones. "Or, Grover could have tossed the guns into some gully on the prairie."

"Perhaps it was Indians after all?" Custer suggested.

"Maybe," Cameron agreed. "On the other hand, Grover says the Sioux

[*Turn page*]

OYSTERMAN FINDS REAL PEARL!

AMAGANSETT, N. Y.—Capt. Ted Lester has discovered a gem among whiskies. "It's Calvert Reserve," he says, "and the day I first tasted it, I switched to Calvert's smoother taste. It's a real find!"

CALVERT RESERVE BLENDED WHISKEY—86.8 PROOF—65% GRAIN NEUTRAL SPIRITS. CALVERT DISTILLERS CORP., N.Y.C.

chased him for several miles, but there are no tracks of twenty ponies leading away from this spot. Just the trail of one pony, heading in the direction of Comstock's cabin!"

"I always told you somethin' like this would happen," Bearfoot muttered to Joe Cameron. "We shouldn't have left them two fellers alone together."

"You never did like me, Bearfoot," Sharp Grover snarled. "You always been claimin' I hated Bill Comstock. Well, I never did! Me an' Bill was friends for years!"

GENERAL CUSTER turned to Pueblo Jones. "What do you make of it, Pueblo?"

"Right hard to say," Pueblo replied. "The tracks sure look like they was all made by the same hoss. Comstock ain't scalped, which it ain't like the Sioux to leave his hair on. On the other hand, Grover is wounded in the shoulder. He could have shot himself to make his story look good.

"Comstock was an old friend of the Sioux, which may explain how come they didn't scalp him. They'd mebbe turn on him in times like these, when there ain't no white man safe on the prairie, but they might not scalp an old friend.

"I don't reckon you got much of a case against Grover," Pueblo concluded, "although I'm admittin' it does look mighty funny!"

"I'm inclined to agree with you," Custer replied. "But Grover is under arrest until we get back to the fort where we can go into the case more thoroughly."

A trooper took the body of Bill Comstock up on the front of his saddle, and the procession made its way back to Fort Wallace. Comstock was given a full military funeral in the weed-grown cemetery that had sprung up beside the fort.

After the funeral, a drumhead court martial convened to consider the cause of Comstock's death. There was little or no real evidence, and when the conversations held at the site of the murder had been rehashed, the court decided that Sharp Grover could not be held accountable.

But this acquittal far from settled the case, and the killing of Bill Comstock became a frontier *cause célèbre* from which sprang a bitter feud that eventually resulted in further bloodshed.

But now Colonel Sandy Forsyth set to work to recruit his company of fifty scouts. His first move was a most undiplomatic one, for he announced that he was appointing Sharp Grover his chief of scouts.

CHAPTER XI

The Buckskin Legion

SANDY FORSYTH was one of the best-liked and most-admired military men in the West. He had arrived on the frontier with a great reputation for bravery, and with as fine a record as any officer who came out of the Civil War.

When word spread through the frontier towns and border forts that Sandy Forsyth was recruiting a company of scouts, a great wave of excitement rippled over the prairie from the Pawnee Fort to Juleburg.

Recruits began turning up, singly, and in groups of two and three. Tough, rugged, hard-bitten men they were for the most part, and perhaps their like had never been seen before in such large numbers.

Within two days, Forsyth had enlisted thirty men, and in two days more, had filled his complement of fifty.

"This is no ordinary group of men," Forsyth remarked to Cameron. "All but four of them are native-born Americans, and a good many of them served in either the Union or the Confederate army during the war. My first sergeant, Bill McCall, was a brigadier-general in the Union army!"

"It's amazin'!" said Pueblo Jones.

"Bet there never was a company of enlisted men like it in any army in the world!"

Joe Cameron and Bearfoot Gorman were slightly surprised to find that Pueblo Jones was still with them. It seemed inconceivable that any commander, having been offered the services of Pueblo Jones, would pass over the greatest of all scouts to select a man like Grover for chief of scouts, particularly when the circumstances of Comstock's death had convinced about half the men that Sharp was a murderer.

But Pueblo Jones said: "Shucks, what difference does it make who's called chief of scouts? We'll all go along an' just do the best we can."

The equipment of the Forsyth Scouts was simplicity itself. Each man was issued one blanket, a saddle and bridle, a rope and picket pin, a canteen, a haversack, a butcher knife, a tin plate and a tin cup.

For weapons, each man had a Colt revolver with 30 rounds of ammunition, and a Spencer repeating carbine, with 140 rounds.

The camp kettles, picks, shovels, medical supplies, extra rations of salt and coffee, together with 4,000 rounds of ammunition, were hauled by a pack train of four mules. Each of the scouts was mounted on the best horse that could be obtained.

The Forsyth Scouts were no sooner formed and equipped than the call to action came. At that time, End of Track was thirteen miles west of Fort Wallace, and word came that the Cheyenne Dog Soldiers had raided End of Track, attacking a train of freight wagons, and killing two teamsters. They also drove off some horses and mules. The Buckskin Legion took to the saddle and headed for End of Track.

As the command rode out of Fort Wallace, Joe Cameron found himself a mile or so ahead of the column, riding with young Lieutenant Beecher. Fred Beecher was a nephew of the great Henry Ward Beecher, and the young officer had been wounded at Fredericksburg and again at Gettysburg, the Gettysburg wound having given him a permanent limp.

Beecher had been on the frontier for three years and had earned a fine reputation as a scout, his coolness, courage and tact having rendered him an ideal choice for second in command of the Forsyth Scouts.

Reaching the spot where the freighter's train had been attacked, Cameron and Beecher dismounted to study the ground. By the time the main command had arrived, they had decided that the attack had been made by not more than twenty or twenty-five warriors

"Looks like the tracks of about thirty-five ponies," Cameron pointed out. "And since a war party usually leads eight or ten spare hosses, reckon we can figure about twenty-five warriors in this bunch."

THE teamsters, well-armed and courageous, had barricaded themselves behind their heavy wagons and had driven off the Dog Soldiers. Two teamsters who had foolishly fallen behind the rest of the train, had been killed and scalped. But when the Indians ran up against the stiff defense of the main train, they had decamped, leaving a well-marked and easily followed trail.

Forsyth's command followed the trail until dark, when camp was made. Up before dawn, the command was on the trail again as soon as it was light enough to see.

By midmorning, the trail was becoming less and less distinct, and every few hundred yards or so, a lone pony's tracks led off at a tangent.

"They're splitting up," Cameron told Forsyth. "The warriors will drop out one by one until no trail is left. Then they'll all meet later on at some point agreed upon. No use to follow this trail any farther."

Forsyth called a halt, and summoned his most trusted hands to consultation. Around the Colonel gathered Beecher, Grover, McCall, Cameron, Bearfoot, and Pueblo Jones.

"They're scatterin' now," Pueblo

Jones pointed out, "but they'll join their main band later on. They've seen us, an' know they're bein' followed. They ain't strong enough to fight us, so they've split up for a get-away."

"My guess is that they're heading for the Republican River," Cameron stated. "Every trail that has branched off from the main trail heads generally in a northerly direction. Why don't we head up that way, and see can we pick up the trail again along the Republican?"

"Good idea!" Forsyth agreed. "I have determined to find the Indians and to punish them, no matter what the odds against us. We gain nothing by staying here, or by returning to Fort Wallace. We'll push on to the Republican, as Cameron suggests, and see what happens when we get there."

On the fifth day out of Fort Wallace, the command reached the Republican River, and on the north bank of that stream, they found a wickiup, an overnight emergency shelter made by bending down slim willow trees, tying their tops together and roofing the rude teepee over with long grass. Judging by the tracks, two warriors had camped and spent the night there, only twenty-four hours ago.

Following the trail left by the two warriors, the command presently found where they had been joined by three more Indians. The trail of the five was easy to follow, and led to the encampment of a small war party.

The war party's trail, in turn, led to a broad, well-beaten track which grew steadily wider and easier to follow as small parties of Indians had joined it from one side or the other.

Finally, the trail became a broad, well-beaten road, down which herds of horses and cattle had been driven. Travois had scored the ground deeply, and the command followed the trail up the Republican river to the fork of the Arickaree. Here Forsyth called a halt, and a night encampment was made.

"Look, Colonel," Joe Cameron suggested. "I got an idea. Suppose you push along the trail with the command, moving slowly an' cautiously, while I ride on ahead an' see if I can reach Roman Nose. I still think this thing can be settled without resorting to a pitched battle."

"I don't understand," Forsyth admitted.

"It's this way," Cameron continued. "Roman Nose is an old friend of mine. He's a fine fellow, and perhaps he can be reasoned with. If I could talk him into coming in for a council with you, don't you suppose you could persuade him to quit attacking the railroad?"

"I'd certainly like to try," Forsyth exclaimed. "But in times like these, can you ride right into his camp and talk with him without being killed?"

"I sure can!" Cameron told him. "Roman Nose will see that no harm comes to me. It's worth one last try, Colonel. If I fail, we're no worse off than we were before. And if I succeed, and bring Roman Nose back with me, probably you and he can fix up a deal so there won't be any more fighting!"

THE commanding officer frowned and rubbed his chin in perplexity.

"I don't know," Forsyth hesitated. "We were sent out to punish the Indians, not make peace treaties with them. We're expected to get Roman Nose, dead or alive!"

"Wouldn't you rather have him alive and workin' on our side, than dead, and a martyr to every Injun from here to the Washita?" Cameron demanded eagerly.

"Yes, I suppose you're right," Forsyth admitted. "Well, you have my permission to try it. Do you intend to go alone?"

"Certainly." Cameron nodded. "The Dog Soldiers would never let me get near Roman Nose if I had other white men with me."

"Cameron's got a good idea, Colonel," Sharp Grover said, earnestly. "I vote we let him try it."

All the others agreeing, it was decided that at dawn, Cameron was to ride on ahead of the command in an effort to find Roman Nose and reason with him.

CHAPTER XII

The Metal Fork

DURING the afternoon of the third day after leaving Forsyth's command, Cameron was riding up the Arickaree Fork, following the broad Indian trail, when he was halted suddenly by two Cheyennes whom he recognized as Dog Soldiers named Eight Horns and White Contrary.

Cameron had always counted these two among his best friends in the Cheyenne camp, and today their greeting was friendly enough, although a bit more reserved than usual, reflecting the tension that existed between the two races.

"Who are those soldiers we have seen marching this way?" Eight Horns demanded.

"They are not soldiers, exactly," Cameron replied. "They are scouts commanded by soldier chiefs."

"Do they come to attack us?" White Contrary asked.

"I do not know if there will be fighting," Cameron replied, truthfully. "It will depend on what Roman Nose decides to do."

"Roman Nose will fight!" Eight Horns grunted. "We will all fight!"

"Then you will all be killed," Cameron told him. "That is why I have come to see if the fighting cannot be prevented."

"It cannot be prevented," White Contrary said. "You had better go away. When the fighting starts, you may not be safe, even in the lodges of the Dog Soldiers!"

"But I want to talk to Roman Nose," Cameron pointed out. "No one will dare to harm a guest of the Dog Soldiers! Which of the war societies is policing the camp?"

"It is the Dog Soldiers' turn," White Contrary replied.

"Then you two Dog Soldiers take me to Roman Nose," Cameron suggested. "I will go as your prisoner, if you wish. Here are my weapons. Take them."

"We do not need to take our friend's weapons," Eight Horns decided. "You come with us. We will lead you directly to Roman Nose. He is visiting today in one of the Sioux camps."

"Are the Sioux camped nearby?" Cameron asked, as the three men rode forward.

"Yes," Eight Horns admitted. "There are two large camps of Sioux. Maybe six hundred lodges. Two miles downstream are the Cheyenne lodges, about four hundred. Also nearby are fifty lodges of our bloodbrothers, the Arapahoe. There are also some Comanche, some Kiowa and a few Apache."

Cameron was startled. A thousand lodges meant more than a thousand warriors. And Forsyth and Beecher, with only fifty men, were riding straight into a camp that could muster a thousand warriors! Roman Nose *must* be persuaded not to fight!

"Which chiefs are in the Cheyenne camp?" Cameron asked.

"It is mostly a Dog Soldier camp," Eight Horns replied. "All the Dog Soldiers are there with the four chiefs, Tall Bull, White Horse, Bull Bear, and Tangle Hair. White Bull is with Roman Nose, too."

"Some of the Red Shields are with us," White Contrary added.

"What important men are in the Sioux camp?" Cameron asked next.

"Pawnee Killer is there," Eight Horns replied. "As to the others, I have not heard. But the Sioux sent word yesterday that if the approaching white men wanted to fight, the Sioux will do as Roman Nose says. They have placed their warriors under him. So have the Arapahoe."

Cameron knew that if it came to a fight, Roman Nose would once more be the supreme war leader of the combined Indian forces. He knew that he must find a way to persuade Roman Nose to keep his warriors from attacking Forsyth. Failing that, Cameron hoped at

least to prevent Roman Nose from leading the Indians. If Roman Nose refused to fight, the Sioux and the Arapahoe might attack the white scouts, but their chances of success would be greatly lessened if they lacked the support of the Dog Soldiers and the leadership of Roman Nose.

WHEN Joe Cameron and his Dog Soldier escort reached the great Indian camp on the Arickaree, Eight Horns and White Contrary rode straight through the heart of one of the two Sioux encampments. At first, the Sioux were inclined to be hostile. In fact, some of the squaws were running about, screeching and laughing, and preparing to pelt the white "prisoner" with sticks and stones. But the two Dog Soldiers, by means of the sign language, conveyed the idea that Cameron was not a prisoner but a guest of Roman Nose. Whereupon, a number of Sioux warriors gathered around and forced the women to put a stop to their hostile demonstrations.

No further attention was paid to Cameron as he and his escort made their way to a hilltop where Roman Nose and a number of the Dog Soldier chiefs and leading men sat as guests of the Sioux.

A Sioux woman was frying bread in a white man's frying pan over a small fire.

It was evident that a feast was in progress.

Roman Nose was not inclined to be quite so friendly as Cameron had hoped he would be.

"Are you with those soldiers they tell me are marching this way?" Roman Nose demanded, as Cameron dismounted and greeted the huge warrior.

"I am," Cameron replied. "But they are not soldiers. They are scouts working for the soldiers."

"They tell me there are fifty of them," Roman Nose stated. "Who ever heard of scouts traveling in groups of fifty?"

"These scouts are different," Cameron explained. "They are like a society of warriors, banded together to work for the Long Knives."

"I do not like such scouts!" Roman Nose grunted. "Why are they marching toward this camp?"

Cameron would not lie, even though he knew that it might cost him his life to tell the truth.

"They are coming to fight the Dog Soldiers," he stated, calmly. "They have orders to get Roman Nose, dead or alive, if you choose to fight, or to bring you in for a council with General Sheridan if you want peace!"

Instead of growing angry, Roman Nose received this startling ultimatum with a burst of shouting laughter.

"Ho!" he roared, turning to Eight Horns and White Contrary. "Hear what our white friend says! Roman Nose sits here, surrounded by one thousand warriors who will do as he says, and fifty white men are coming to capture or kill him!"

When this had been conveyed to the Sioux by means of the sign language, a general laugh went up on the hill top.

"Are these white men crazy?" Roman Nose asked. "Have they all joined a Contrary society?"

"No," Cameron replied. "They are buckskin-men!"

"Ho!" This information sobered Roman Nose a bit. "Buckskin men! Perhaps that explains it!"

The Indians knew that of all white men, the so-called "buckskin men" were most to be feared. The designation had long been given to whites who had either lived with the Indians, or had spent years in hunting and trapping. Inured to hardship and toil, experienced in the ways of the prairie, these men were worth ten times their number in city-bred cavalrymen.

"Who leads these buckskin men?" Roman Nose demanded.

"Colonel Forsyth and Lieutenant Beecher."

"Good men," Roman Nose said, and grunted. "Forsyth is a good fighter, and Beecher is a good scout. Who else?"

"Sharp Grover is with them," Cameron replied.

THE Sioux who were listening understood no Cheyenne, but they knew the name "Sharp Grover," and an angry mutter arose. Grover had lived with the Sioux for years, and no doubt they had considered him as their friend.

"Is Comstock with you?" Roman Nose asked.

"Comstock is dead," Cameron replied. "He was killed by twenty Sioux warriors."

"I had not heard," Roman Nose stated. Then he turned to the Sioux and talked with them for a moment in the sign language.

"The Sioux say it is not true," the big warrior said finally, to Cameron. "They say no Sioux warriors killed Comstock. That man near you is Pawnee Killer—he knows everything that his warriors do. He says no one has reported killing Comstock."

Cameron knew that most Indians were liars, for lying was considered a perfectly legitimate method of dealing with enemies, or with friends, for that matter, if anything were to be gained by lying. But if there were ever two Indians who could be expected to tell the truth, those two were Roman Nose and Pawnee Killer. Cameron knew that Forsyth's Scouts would be interested in hearing that the Sioux knew nothing of the death of Comstock.

"I am sorry that Comstock is dead," Roman Nose said, sincerely. "He understood the Cheyennes. But, Cameron, if you are with these buckskin men, what are you doing here?"

"I came to try to persuade you not to fight," Cameron told him. "All these troubles can be straightened out peacefully. Come back with me to Colonel Forsyth, and he will take you to Sheridan. Fighting will gain the Cheyennes nothing!"

"What would a council with Sheridan gain us?" Roman Nose asked curiously.

"General Sheridan is a just man and a great war chief," Cameron pointed out. "All he will ask is that you abide by the terms of the Medicine Lodge treaty."

"Never!" Roman Nose shouted, angrily. "I did not sign that treaty! We will not give up our land between the Platte and the Arkansas rivers; we will not permit the building of the railroad, and we will not go live on a reservation. All of these things the treaty requires us to do. Black Kettle signed that treaty, but Roman Nose did not. The Dog Soldiers will fight!"

As a murmer of assent arose from the listening Cheyenne chiefs, the Sioux woman who had been cooking at the small fire began to pass slabs of fried bread, each on a piece of bark. Cameron held one in his hand, waiting for his bread to cool, and feeling the heat of it through the bark. He noticed, idly, that the woman was lifting the bread from the frying pan with a long-handled metal fork, no doubt looted from some wagon train.

Eight Horns squatted beside Cameron, hungrily eating the hot bread.

"You had better leave, friend," Eight Horns whispered. "Roman Nose is angry. You cannot persuade him not to fight."

Before Cameron could answer, Roman Nose began talking again.

"I am not afraid of the Long Knives," he said, "and I am not afraid of fifty buckskin men! My magic war bonnet, which White Bull made for me, protects me! I will ride straight in among these buckskin men and then kill them all. If I wear my magic war bonnet, their bullets cannot touch me!"

The war bonnet! Cameron had forgotten it for the moment. He remembered now that the rigid observance of certain taboos was all that maintained the magic of the famous bonnet. White Bull had said something about a metal fork. That was it! Roman Nose must never eat food that had been lifted with anything made of metal! And the Sioux woman was lifting the fried bread with a metal fork!

His heart beating with suppressed excitement, Cameron realized that he had found a way to keep Roman Nose from riding into battle. He watched covertly until Roman Nose had eaten two pieces of the fried bread. Then he

started to speak to the warrior, but decided that it would be better if an Indian pointed out the terrible thing that had happened. So he nudged Eight Horns.

"Is it not true," he whispered, "that the magic of Roman Nose's war bonnet will be broken if he eats food that has been lifted with metal?"

"*Ai,*" Eight Horns agreed. "It is true."

"Look!" Cameron pointed. "The squaw is using a metal fork. And Roman Nose has eaten two pieces of the bread!"

EIGHT HORNS gasped in superstitious terror, and called immediately to Roman Nose.

"Roman Nose, a terrible thing has happened here! You have eaten food that was lifted with a metal fork!"

A hush settled over all the Cheyennes who were present as Roman Nose stood up and strode to the fire, where the startled woman paused in her cooking, fork held in mid-air, as the huge warrior towered over her.

"Woman!" Roman Nose thundered. "You have spoiled my magic!"

When this had been translated for the benefit of the Sioux, the poor woman almost died of superstitious terror. She fell to the ground, quaking with fear, and expecting to be killed on the spot. When the Sioux understood what had happened, they were all for slaying the unfortunate squaw at once, but Roman Nose interceded for her.

"Leave her alone!" he grunted. "She did not know. How could a Sioux woman be expected to know of a Cheyenne taboo?

"It is my fault," he said, sadly. "I am supposed to watch these things. But I was so angry, and was talking so much, that I did not notice.

"My magic is destroyed. I cannot fight, for if I fight without my war bonnet, I shall be killed. White Bull said so!"

Tangle Hair, an aged and venerated chief of the Dog Soldiers, came forward and urged Roman Nose to send for White Bull.

"The power of White Bull is great," Tangle Hair pointed out. "No doubt he can perform ceremonies which will overcome what this woman has done to your magic."

White Bull was sent for, and when the great medicine man arrived from the Cheyenne camp, and had been told what had happened, his first impulse was to make light of the matter. He knew that he could chant a few incantations, and perform a few mystic rites which would persuade Roman Nose that his magic was restored.

But the more White Bull thought about it, the more he saw that he was on the spot. He dared not make light of the matter. White Bull had talked so much about the importance of his taboos, and had stressed their sacredness so many times that he could not brush this happening off as being of no consequence.

When the medicine man saw Cameron seated in the circle of the Dog Soldiers, he knew who was responsible for this predicament. He thought that perhaps he could claim that because there had been a white man present, it was all right for Roman Nose to eat food that had been lifted from a metal fork.

But he doubted if the Indians would accept such an easy explanation.

"It is bad," he agreed, finally. "Roman Nose must not fight until great purification ceremonies have been performed."

"White men are coming this way," Roman Nose said harshly. "There will be fighting tomorrow, or the next day. How long will these purification ceremonies last?"

"A long time," White Bull said, reluctantly, for again, he dared not make light of his medicine art. "They cannot be performed hastily or they will do no good. Roman Nose, you will have to stay out of this fighting that is coming up."

"Yes." Roman Nose nodded He turned to the Indians about him. "What White Bull says is true. Tell all the people that if they want to fight these white men who are coming, they will have to do so without Roman Nose."

Even the Sioux accepted this as a matter of course. Everyone knew that it was suicide to go against the taboos of a protective thing, whether it be an amulet worn about the neck, or a war bonnet worn on the head.

The feast on the hilltop now broke up in some consternation, and the chiefs of all the tribes went home to consider the evil thing that had happened. Perhaps it would be better if no Indians engaged in battle for a time. The Sioux decided that there was no sense in taking chances with spirits, even Cheyenne spirits.

Riding back toward the Cheyenne camp with Roman Nose, Cameron commented:

"I am glad that you cannot fight, Roman Nose. I would not like to see my friend killed."

"Eight Horns tells me that it was you who pointed out the metal fork just before he told me about it," Roman Nose replied. "I thank you for noticing what had happened. Otherwise, I would not have known about it, and would have been killed tomorrow!"

WHITE BULL knew that this was not true. He realized that Roman Nose's belief in the protective powers of the bonnet, combined with a great deal of just plain luck, had been responsible for the effectiveness of the magic. White Bull knew that Cameron realized this, too. White Bull said to Cameron, when no other Indians were riding within hearing:

"You have won, my friend. For a long time, we have struggled, you and I, to make Roman Nose do opposite things. I wanted Roman Nose to fight tomorrow; to go down there and wipe out these fifty buckskin men. Now you have prevented it, which is what you came here to do."

"That is true, White Bull," Cameron admitted. "But if Roman Nose had led the warriors into battle against the buckskin men, you would have been sorry. You would have found that the buckskin men are not Long Knives who do not know how to fight Indians!"

"Ho!" White Bull snorted. "What can fifty men do against a thousand?"

"Now that Roman Nose will not fight," Cameron suggested, "perhaps no Indians will fight for a time? Perhaps the camp will break up and move before the buckskin men get here?"

"No!" White Bull cried, angrily. "I will persuade the Dog Soldiers to fight without Roman Nose. I will persuade the Sioux to fight. Tonight I will tell them that Roman Nose's magic protected him alone, and so long as he does not fight, everything will be all right. They will believe me!"

This was bad news, for Cameron realized that White Bull's influence and reputation were so great that he could do as he said he would do. But there wasn't anything Cameron could do about that.

Roman Nose, who had been riding ahead with Tangle Hair, White Horse, Bull Bear, and Tall Bull, now reined in his horse and waited until Cameron and White Bull caught up with him.

"You had better leave," he told Cameron. "The Dog Soldier chiefs are very angry at you. They are saying that when you came into camp today, a very bad thing happened, and they want you to leave before something else goes wrong."

"Do they take me for a medicine man?" Cameron demanded. "But if that is the way they feel, I will go. Have you any message for Colonel Forsyth?"

"You might tell him that Roman Nose says the Cheyennes will not give up their land," the great war leader replied. "Tell him the railroad must stop! Tell him the Dog Soldiers will die fighting before they will live on a reservation!

"Tell him," Roman Nose continued, "that you have seen this camp, and that a thousand warriors are waiting to fight him. Tell him to go away, or tomorrow, or the next day, a thousand warriors will come and wipe him out!

"And then," Roman Nose concluded, "after you have told him these things, leave the buckskin men and return to Fort Wallace. I will not be in the fight,

so no harm can come to me. I would not like to see my friend Cameron killed while fighting his old friends, the Dog Soldiers!"

"I will tell Forsyth what you have said," Cameron promised. "As for leaving him, he is my war chief, and if he tells me to stay, I will stay!"

"Then you will die!" Roman Nose grunted. "You and Forsyth and all his buckskin men!"

The big Indian thrust out his right hand and shook hands with Cameron, white man fashion. Then he whirled his horse and galloped swiftly into the Cheyenne camp.

Eight Horns and White Contrary rode up alongside Cameron's horse.

"Come," said Eight Horns, "we will take you out of camp so that no harm can come to you."

The three riders galloped back along the trail until they were four or five miles from the Indian camp. Here the Dog Soldiers drew rein.

"Do as Roman Nose said," White Contrary advised. "When we surround the buckskin men, we will not like to feel that our friend is down there shooting at us!"

"If I were a Dog Soldier, I would obey Roman Nose," Cameron replied. "But I am a buckskin man and must obey the buckskin chief. You would do the same thing."

"Yes," Eight Horns agreed, and White Contrary nodded. They understood.

"But it is too bad," they said, as they solemnly shook hands. "Goodby, friend!"

Then they rode away, leaving Cameron to find his way back to Forsyth.

COMING NEXT ISSUE

COWHIDE MASQUERADE

A Rip-Roaring Story of Sandstone Town

By FRANCIS H. AMES

CHAPTER XIII

"Look at the Indians!"

KNOWING the present temper of the Indians, Cameron rode warily, keeping a sharp lookout for warriors. He knew that hunting parties would be returning to camp about this time of day. He had no desire to encounter the Sioux, for he was not known to them, and he figured that they would consider him fair game.

In riding downstream, he stuck to the broad trail the Indians had made as they traveled up the Arickaree. The passage of so many people had probably frightened all game out of the section, and hunting parties would be looking elsewhere for meat. Cameron planned to ride until dark, then make camp, and wait until daylight before resuming his journey.

But Forsyth was closer than Cameron had figured, for the buckskin men had been marching rapidly since he had left them. Just before the sun went down, he came suddenly upon Forsyth's camp.

The Arickaree flowed in a northeasterly direction, but just after rounding a sharp bend it turned almost due east for a short distance.

Around the bend lay a pleasant meadow about two miles long and perhaps as many wide. To the north, a line of low bluffs dropped off sharply for fifty feet or so to a very flat plain that swept a mile and a half down to the north bank of the Arickaree.

Out in the center of the stream bed, perhaps seventy yards from either bank, lay a small island, two hundred and fifty feet long, and not more than sixty or seventy feet wide. Long grass grew on the island, and there was a scattering of willow thickets, while at the foot of the island stood a lone cottonwood tree, not more than tweny feet high.

On the flat, pleasant, parklike meadow

just to the north of the island, Forsyth's men had pitched their camp. As Cameron came down stream, he could see the tiny supper fires flaring in the gathering gloom.

He caught the smell of coffee, and suddenly realized that he was indeed very hungry.

HIS approach had been detected by the scouts, of course, but he had been promptly recognized and hailed by Bearfoot Gorman.

"We were worried about you," Bearfoot said, as Cameron rode into the circle of fires and dismounted. "Where you been?"

"I've been busy," Cameron said. "Over by the Cheyenne camp. Where's Colonel Forsyth?" Cameron was directed to the fire where Forsyth, Beecher, Grover, and Sergeant McCall were eating.

After Cameron had made a complete and lengthy report of everything he had seen and heard in the Cheyenne and Sioux camps, Forsyth shook his head, doubtfully.

"It would appear that we are in a bad position," he said. "To make matters worse, we're about out of supplies. We have only a little salt, and very little coffee. Of course, we can subsist on the meat we shoot, but it's going to be meager fare for a while. Do you think the Indians will attack us?"

"Yes, I'm afraid they will," Cameron replied. "They'll miss the leadership of Roman Nose, who is by far their best field general, but both Roman Nose and White Bull told me that the tribes will fight without him.

"They feel that since they are a thousand to our fifty, their victory should be an easy one, and they can get along without Roman Nose."

"I expect they're right, too," Pueblo Jones grunted. "If they come down on us, Colonel, we better make for that little island over there, an' dig ourselves in. Mebbe we can hold 'em off!"

"We'll try, anyhow," Forsyth replied. "We came out to fight Indians, and it looks like that's what we're going to do!"

AS soon as the men had eaten, Forsyth made his dispositions for the night. He ordered that all horses be securely picketed, and that each man was to sleep within reach of his picket pin.

Just before dawn the next morning, Cameron awoke suddenly with the feeling that something was wrong. He saw that Pueblo Jones was sitting up in his blanket.

"Thought I heard somethin'," the old scout whispered.

"So did I," Cameron told him. "Let's take a look-see."

They found that Forsyth had heard something, too, and the Colonel was out talking to a sentry. Both were watching the skyline along the top of the ridge to the south of the camp when Cameron and Pueblo Jones joined them.

As the men stood there, watching and listening, the light increased. Presently the thump of hoofs reached their ears and the heads of three warriors showed against the skyline above the ridge. Cameron, Jones and the sentry immediately cut loose with their rifles, and Forsyth shouted:

"Indians! Turn out! Turn out!"

With amazing alacrity and coolness, the buckskin men sprang from their blankets, and seized weapons and picket ropes. None too soon, either, for over the ridge and down toward the camp came charging a dozen yelling, whooping warriors, waving blankets and beating frantically on small drums in an effort to stampede the white men's horses.

The scouts fired a ragged volley and one of the warriors fell from his pony, shot through the chest. The others turned and rode wide, their angry shouts attesting to the fact that their attempted surprise stampede had been a complete failure.

As soon as the warriors had disappeared, Forsyth gave the order to saddle up. Cameron coiled his picket rope, thrust the bridle over his horse's head, and cinched up the saddle. By the time he had finished, practically all of the scouts were ready to mount.

But the order to mount did not come.

Forsyth held his men in a line, each scout with bridle reins thrown over his left arm, leaving both hands free to work his rifle.

"If they come back to the attack," Forsyth directed, "each man fire at will. Whatever you do, hold your ground!"

They had not long to wait. Suddenly Sharp Grover cried:

"Colonel, look at the Indians!"

The whole valley had miraculously come alive with warriors. They came from everywhere. Mounted warriors charged over the ridge to the south; more painted horsemen plunged down stream from the west. Warriors on foot appeared out of the tall grass to the north, while scores of feathered braves poured out of the narrow gorge to the east.

Forsyth was completely surrounded, hemmed in on every side by a thousand fierce fighting men. But the scouts stood coolly to horse, sending volley after volley from their repeating rifles crashing into the charging warriors.

It is doubtful if trained and disciplined troops could have withstood that deadly fire, and it was too much for the Indians who had expected to take the camp by surprise. The waves of warriors fell back, and presently not an Indian was within rifle range.

In this initial attack, the Indians missed the personal leadership of Roman Nose. Refusing to enter the fight, but trying to exert a little long-distance generalship, Roman Nose had advised against the attempt to stampede the scouts' horses.

He knew that such an attempt would serve only to sound the alarm and give the buckskin men time to prepare for battle. Roman Nose had further suggested that a large body of warriors sneak down in the pre-dawn darkness and occupy the island in the stream, thus cutting off the scouts from their only possible place of refuge.

BUT a few young braves, anxious to gain a little personal glory, had charged the white man's picket lines, and in the resulting excitement, the Indians had forgotten to occupy the island.

Now, in the lull that followed the warriors' withdrawal, Forsyth was quick to seize the opportunity to fortify his position.

"Get to the island!" he shouted, and the buckskin legion, leading their horses, ran pell-mell for the center of the stream bed. Reaching the island, they quickly tied their horses to the low willow thickets, forming the animals in a ring around their position. Then, with the picks and shovels which had been brought on the pack mules, they began to dig an entrenchment and to throw up breastworks.

Half of the men dug in the sand while the others stood guard, rifles at the alert. Cameron and Gorman found themselves paired off at the eastern end of the island, and as Joe dug rapidly with short-handled entrenching shovel, Bearfoot fired occasionally at some bold warrior who ventured within range.

Indian sharpshooters were picking off the white men's horses one by one. A horse would be hit, scream in agony and thresh about so wildly that nearby men would have to scramble for their lives. Then the stricken brute would collapse, and his body would be dragged in front of the trenches to help form a barricade.

The island was now the center of a hail of bullets as the Indians bent every effort to destroy the scouts' horses Men began to be hit. Two or three of the scouts were killed, and several were wounded. Finally, the last remaining horse went down, and from up on the ridge where a large number of warriors had gathered, a fierce, exultant shout arose.

"There goes the last of their horses!" yelled a man in plain English, to the amazement of many of the buckskin men.

"Who was that?" Forsyth demanded.

"Sounded like Squawman Delaney," Joe Cameron replied. "Probably Bugle McDowell is with 'em, too."

He had scarcely spoken the words when the valley rang to the clear, twang-

ing notes of a bugle. Again and again, the bugle trumpeted the charge, and down upon the island plunged several hundred mounted warriors, riding like crazy men.

They rode as Indians usually did, with no common front, no discipline and no team-work. It was every warrior for himself, and each tried to outdo his fellows in feats of trick horsemanship.

Some swung down from their running ponies until their feet touched the ground, then sprang back into the rawhide saddles. Others sat upright, hurling feathered lances high into the air and catching them skilfully as they descended. Some clung like burrs to the far sides of their mounts, firing their rifles at random under the necks of the horses.

Straight down on the island they bore. The buckskin men began shooting, each man aiming and squeezing the trigger as coolly as though at target practice. Warriors began dropping from the saddles, some to crawl frantically away, others to lie still in the sand.

The charging warriors split into two streams as they reached the island, pouring past on either side of the white men's trenches. As they swept past, they poured in a deluge of bullets and arrows, then swept on, to break up and scatter out of rifle range.

Many of the scouts were hit, and a few were killed. Forsyth, who had remained standing upright all during the skirmish, was struck in the right thigh, the bullet ranging upward and lodging beneath the skin. As he fell, two of the scouts pulled him down behind the earthworks.

Gasping in pain, Forsyth pulled up his left leg to ease the agony by shifting position, and an Indian put a bullet through it, shattering the bone between knee and ankle. Surgeon J. H. Mooers, who had been assigned to the Buckskin Men by the Army Medical Department, tended Forsyth's wounds as best he could, but was greatly handicapped by the fact that all surgical and medical supplies had been left at the site of the night's encampment when the men made their desperate break for the shelter of the island.

AFTER he had done what he could for his commanding officer, the surgeon seized a rifle and began firing at the Indians. Presently he registered a hit, and as the warrior plunged from his horse, Surgeon Mooers raised his head above the breastworks, saying to Forsyth:

"I think that one will not trouble us again."

He had no more than spoken when a bullet struck him in the forehead.

"I'm hit!" said Surgeon Mooers, as he rolled back down behind the breastwork.

In spite of the pain in his badly shattered legs, Forsyth crawled to Mooers and turned the surgeon over on his back. He saw that the bullet had entered the man's head just above the left eye, and Forsyth knew at once that the wound was mortal. Surgeon Mooers never regained consciousness, but lingered three days before dying.

Meanwhile, Scouts Wilson and Culver had been killed, and twenty of the men were wounded, some slightly, some seriously, although all but two or three were able to remain at their posts and continue shooting.

The Indians had suffered far more heavily, having lost about thirty-five killed, and many more wounded. The reception accorded them by the white men had been more than they had bargained for, and the warriors now drew off out of rifle range. Forming a complete encirclement of the island, hundreds of braves sat their horses, while hundreds of others dismounted and moved about on foot, or sat down on the ground.

"They don't know what to do next," Bearfoot Gorman observed.

"Think they will attack us again?" Colonel Forsyth called.

"They would if Roman Nose were here," Joe Cameron replied. "But without him, they lack leadership. They'll likely just squat on their hunkers for five or six days and starve us out."

"They can do it, too," Lieutenant Beecher commented. "We have less than one day's supply of food. Looks like tomorrow it's horse meat for us!"

The white men on the island had no way of knowing it, but chiefs had withdrawn the warriors while they sent an appeal to Roman Nose to come and help them.

CHAPTER XIV

"I Shall be Killed!"

RIDING in great haste, the chiefs and influential warriors arrived at the Indian camp. They found Roman Nose seated before his lodge, calmly smoking his pipe. Some of the men were inclined to jeer.

"Here sits the great Roman Nose," called one wounded warrior. "He sits and smokes while his people are dying!"

"He is no help to us," said another. "He stays here like an old woman while the battle is going against us!"

"It is your own fault that the battle goes against you!" Roman Nose pointed out, angrily. "Did you occupy the island, as I suggested? No, you did not! You thought you knew best, and had to try to run off the white men's horses! I told you not to do that! But you people knew better than Roman Nose. Now you come running with your tails between your legs, begging me to go down and command you. How will that help, when you fools and children do not have enough sense to do as you are told?"

"Young warriors are hot-headed and hard to handle," an aged man pointed out. "They could not be controlled. Only Roman Nose can make the young men do as they should."

"Well, I will ride down toward the battlefield and see what can be done," Roman Nose consented, reluctantly. "But I cannot take part in the fighting."

Roman Nose mounted his pony and rode toward the battlefield, stopping his horse on a high hill just out of rifle range of the island. When the warriors in the valley saw him appear on the horizon, an exultant yell went up:

"Roman Nose has come!"

But still the great war leader hesitated. He dismounted and sat on the ground, where he was joined presently by Tangle Hair, the aged and honored warrior. At this point, all fighting stopped, as all the warriors withdrew from before the white men's barricade to see what Roman Nose would do.

Roman Nose, troubled in his mind, spoke to Tangle Hair, telling once more how the Sioux woman had lifted his food with a metal fork, thus spoiling the magic of his war bonnet.

"If I fight today, I shall be killed!" he concluded.

Now other warriors rode up and began to harangue Roman Nose, begging him to come down and take command.

"Your men are dying," they told him. "All the fighting men depend on you. They cannot win without you!"

"These people are right!" Tangle Hair agreed. "You are the man we depend on! All those people down there feel that they belong to you!"

And Roman Nose, with pardonable pride, lifted his magnificent head, and replied:

"What this old man says is true! Tell the people that Roman Nose has come!"

Roman Nose slowly shook out his magic war bonnet that he knew no longer had any power to protect him, and prepared himself for battle. The fighting still lagged, as the warriors waited to hear what Roman Nose wanted them to do.

Roman Nose held his war bonnet up to each of the four directions in turn, muttering the incantations White Bull had taught him. Then he carefully painted his face in alternate lines of black and red, after which he mounted his pony and rode forward.

As the figure of the beloved leader appeared in the valley, a thundering roar burst from a thousand husky throats:

"Roman Nose has come!"

And with that mighty yell of exultation ringing in his ears, Roman Nose rode down to battle, saying to those who rode beside him:

"I know that I shall be killed today. But these people are depending on me."

CROUCHED behind the body of his dead horse, Joe Cameron watched Roman Nose ride across the valley and disappear beyond a bend in the stream. Had Cameron had time to think about it, he would have admitted to a strange mixture of feelings. Admiration for his friend, Roman Nose, and regret and sorrow at the course he was taking, mingled with fear of the consequences. For Cameron knew that with Roman Nose to lead them, the warriors would no doubt make short work of the scouts on the island.

"I wonder what the Indians are yelling about," Forsyth exclaimed.

"They're cheering because Roman Nose has arrived," Cameron explained. "That big warrior who just rode across the valley was Roman Nose. Looks like my plan to keep him out of the fight didn't work."

Cameron was at a loss to account for Roman Nose's actions. Knowing the superstitious terror with which all Indians regarded the breaking of magic taboos, he could not understand what had induced Roman Nose to come to the battlefield. He supposed that White Bull had done something to persuade the leader that his magic had been suddenly restored. Cameron, of course, had no way of knowing that Roman Nose had been shamed into taking the war trail despite the incident of the metal fork.

But now, around the bend of the creek, out of range and out of sight of the white men, Roman Nose quickly mustered his savage squadrons. The dim-witted Bugle McDowell, riding beside Roman Nose, blew blast after blast on his artillery trumpet, and the Buckskin Legion, hearing the silvery calls, swore eternal vengeance on the renegade.

Between five and six hundred mounted warriors, most of them Cheyennes, responded to the bugle calls. Placing his own Dog Soldiers in a front rank sixty horsemen wide, Roman Nose formed the rest of the men in ranks behind them.

A hush settled over the valley as Roman Nose raised his right hand, and more than half a thousand warriors walked their horses slowly toward the island. Presently they began to trot, and finally, Roman Nose signaled again, and the warriors came forward at a rushing gallop.

At their head rode Roman Nose, proudly erect, conscious of the fact that behind him thundered the "finest light cavalry the world has ever seen."

It was a magnificent sight, but the white men on the island were old hands at Indian warfare, and were not easily alarmed. Their Spencer carbines crashed out seven shattering volleys that tore into the ranks of the onrushing warriors.

On one of these volleys, Roman Nose, shot through the lower part of the body, plunged from his speeding horse and lay still in the long grass. With cries of rage and anguish, the warriors broke ranks and passed on either side of the island. Then they scattered and fled in all directions.

When Cameron saw Roman Nose fall, he could scarcely resist the impulse to run out and help his friend. Then, suddenly, a sense of his own peril came over him, and he felt a little relief at the great warleader's downfall. It was not a time to think about friendships.

Cameron knew that if Roman Nose died, his death would be a great personal loss. He also knew that his loss would be the white race's great gain, for now there would be peace on the prairie. Now, the railroad would go through, the farmers and merchants would move in, and prosperity would follow.

But there wasn't much time to speculate on the future, and Cameron turned his attention to the comrades about him. Lieutenant Beecher was standing up, leaning weakly on his rifle.

"Better get down, Lieutenant," Cam-

eron cautioned. "A stray shot may hit you."

"Wouldn't matter," Beecher mumbled. "I'm killed, anyway."

The lieutenant fell forward onto his face, and when Cameron reached him he was dead.

The elder Farley was dead, too, and so were Day, Wilson, and Culver. Eight others seemed to be mortally wounded, and nine more had suffered more or less minor wounds.

But the Buckskin Men drew a certain amount of grim satisfaction from the fact that about thirty warriors lay dead before the barricade. One of these, of course, was Roman Nose.

PRESENTLY, however, the huge war leader was seen to struggle up to his hands and knees and start crawling across the sand. Not a white man fired a shot as Roman Nose slowly and painfully dragged himself under the shelter of an overhanging clay bank.

After a few moments, two daring young warriors ventured within rifle range and carried Roman Nose away. Again, not a shot was fired to hinder their progress. Even in the tough hearts of the Indian-hating Buckskin Men there was respect for a fallen foe when the foe was a man like Roman Nose!

Cameron learned later that Roman Nose died about sundown that night.

But now the Indians were seen to tie Roman Nose on a pony and lead him slowly back toward their camp, and as the Indians trooped away from the battlefield, men of Buckskin Legion felt a momentary relief.

"Is it all over?" Forsyth asked. "Will they come back?"

"Reckon they will," Cameron nodded. "But they've shot their wad. They'll never muster another attack like that last one."

"But they can starve us out," Pueblo Jones grunted. "We're plumb out of supplies, and we got nothin' to eat but spoilin' horse meat!"

The men were hungry. They dared not light fires, for it was growing dark and the flames would make each man a clear target for Indian snipers. So they ate horsemeat, drank a little creek water, and settled down for the night.

Nights are cold on the prairie, even following a hot day in midsummer, and the men suffered intensely. The wounded were unable to sleep, and even the well men fared badly.

About midnight, Joe Cameron went over to speak to Colonel Forsyth.

"I think a couple of us could get back to Fort Wallace," Joe explained. "If we left now, we could be a long ways from here by daylight."

"Hate to risk it," Forsyth grunted. "We're comparatively safe behind these barricades, but out on the prairie, no man is safe!"

"We ain't goin' to be safe here for long!" Cameron told him. "That horsemeat will soon be too rotten to eat. Then we starve! Better risk a couple of men now in the hopes of bringing us some relief."

Most of the men were awake, and had overheard the conversation.

"He's right, Colonel!" said Pierre Trudeau. "I'll try to get back to Wallace if you say the word."

"An' I'll go with him!" said Jack Stillwell.

"I was planning to go myself," Cameron objected. "Bearfoot and I can make it."

"I can't spare you," Forsyth told Cameron. "You speak Cheyenne and may be needed here to parley with the chiefs."

So Forsyth gave Stillwell his only map of the country, and instructed him to go to Fort Wallace and tell the commanding officer of their plight.

A few moments later, Trudeau and Stillwell slipped out of camp, walking backwards in the hope that their tracks would be mistaken for moccasin tracks headed toward the island instead of away from it.

As soon as daylight broke, the Indians gathered on all sides of the island and began a desultory rifle fire that did no damage, but kept the white men pinned to their crude fortifications. This potshooting kept up all day, but stopped

as night approached. The night of the second day was one of extreme misery for the white men. They were unable to sleep, and many were growing ill from eating the horsemeat. Everyone was glad to see the sun come up next morning, for it meant warmth, at least.

With daylight, the Indians settled down to a siege, and the third day dragged wearily on. The horsemeat was growing putrid, and could not be eaten. The wounded were delirious, their wounds were festering, and it was seen than most of them would die if help were not soon forthcoming.

Wolves, attracted by the smell of the rotting flesh, gathered on the ridges about the valley, and their howling was a perfect bedlam of goulish sound.

"Them wolves would go mighty tasty, roasted over a slow fire," said Pueblo Jones. "Cameron, let's you and me sneak down valley an' see can we get us a couple."

Trailing their short Spencer carbines, Joe and Pueblo crawled away from the island through the long grass. The wolves scented their coming, and withdrew. But the two scouts waited patiently, well hidden in the grass, until the wolves grew bolder and began to creep closer again. Finally one large gray wolf ventured within rifle range and both men shot at it, killing it instantly.

In less time than it takes to tell, the wolf was skinned and cleaned of entrails. Forsyth judged it safe to light a cooking fire, and presently the wolf meat was boiling in an iron kettle filled with water.

It made thin soup and mighty skimpy eating for so many hungry men, but all voted it the best they had ever tasted. That night, most of the men were able to sleep a little.

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CHAPTER XV

Enough Men Have Died!

NEXT morning the wolf bones were boiled some more and the men drank the "soup" thus obtained. The day was cloudy, bringing relief from the hot prairie sun. Not an Indian had been seen since daylight, so the men who were able to walk began to move around outside their island entrenchments.

"Colonel, why don't you let me take a little look-see around the valley?" said Joe Cameron to Forsyth. "I can scout up stream and maybe find out what the Indians are doing. The Cheyennes all know me, and even if I get caught, I think I can talk the Dog Soldiers into keeping the tribe from killing me." He added, "But I better go alone; I'm the only one around here who's a blood brother of the Dog Soldiers!"

"Try it if you want to," Forsyth agreed, weakly. The colonel's wounds were paining him frightfully, and it was all he could do to remain conscious. "Try anything you think may help us."

"Now look," Cameron said to Bearfoot Gorman and Pueblo Jones. "You fellers stay here. Keep the men close to the island, and whatever you do, if I don't come back, don't get any fool notions about seeing what happened to me. I'll be all right!"

"Ai, kola!" Bearfoot grunted, and Pueblo said: "Good luck!"

Taking his revolver, his knife, and his Spencer carbine, Joe Cameron walked boldly away from the island, making his way upstream through the tall grass.

As he went, he came to the bend in the river around which Roman Nose had led his fatal charge. Above the bend, the river opened into a wide, pleasant plain, and at the top of the ridge along the western edge of this plain, Cameron could see wisps of smoke. He knew in-

stantly that these came from Indian lodges. But not an Indian was in sight.

Crossing the wide plain, Cameron climbed the gently sloping ridge. Nearing the top, he lay down and edged his way forward cautiously. Finally he slowly and carefully poked a peek hole in the grass that grew on the ridge top and was able to see down into the valley below.

Perhaps seventy-five lodges were grouped about in no semblance of order. But everywhere in the valley were large round bare spots on the ground that indicated where other lodges had lately stood, and from these spots were long travois marks. leading off to the north. The Indian camp was breaking up! Most of the lodges had already left, and even as Cameron watched, women began removing the skins from others. The Sioux and the Cheyennes had decided to give up the fight, and were lifting the siege they had maintained on the white man's island fortress!

Joe Cameron's first impulse was to hurry back to Forsyth with the news. But on second thought, he decided to make doubly sure. Anyway, there was nothing much Forsyth could do about it. With less than half of his original force of fifty scouts still able to move about, and the other half on foot, it would be impossible to move the command. It would be a long time before the wounded could be carried, unless a relief column reached them with wagons.

Cameron decided to drop back down the ridge and, traveling under its protection, make for the sandstone bluffs on the north side of the Arickaree. From here he could see the country for miles, and perhaps could locate the movements of all the departing Indians. He wanted to make sure, too, that no scalping parties of young warriors had been left to take the buckskin men by surprise.

When he reached the base of the sandstone bluffs that lined the northern edge of the valley, Cameron paused for ten or fifteen minutes while he watched and listened carefully. Finally, he began to climb the bluff and, on reaching the top, stretched himself out flat in the grass to watch the prairie beyond.

FAR to the north, several dust clouds arose from the plains, and he knew they marked the trail of bands of departing Indians. As he watched, more Indians came up out of the valley to the west of his position and made off toward the north. It became evident that soon there would be no hostiles in the neighborhood.

Up here on the prairieland that stretched as far as the eye could see, there was no tall grass such as grew in the moist river valley. Here, there was only the short, curly buffalo grass that afforded no concealment for anything larger than a grasshopper. So Cameron proceeded cautiously. After traveling two or three miles and encountering nothing alarming, he lay down to peer over a high ridge.

Out in the center of a sloping prairie that lay below, he saw a scaffold such as the Cheyennes built to bury their dead. Beneath the scaffold sat an Indian woman, and a pony was tethered nearby. Since no warriors were in sight, and the dust clouds to the north were drawing farther and farther away, Cameron decided to go down and talk to the woman. No doubt she was someone he knew, and he might learn something of value to Colonel Forsyth.

As he walked down toward the scaffold, the woman raised her head to stare at him for a moment, then resumed her former position, eyes staring at the ground.

As Cameron came within ten yards of her, she again raised her head and said:

"How, *kola!*"

"Hello, friend," Cameron replied, in the Cheyenne tongue. "My heart is sad to see you in mourning here."

The woman made no reply, and as Cameron studied her carefully, he decided that he had never seen her before. After the custom of a mourning widow, she had torn out great handfuls of hair. Her face was streaked with

blood from the gashes she had cut in it, and he saw that she had cut two fingers from each hand, a common method of demonstrating sorrow.

Presently the woman looked up again and said:

"You were his friend. You tried to save him."

And then Cameron recognized the wife of Roman Nose.

"Is that Roman Nose on the scaffolding?" he inquired.

"Yes," the woman replied. "Roman Nose is dead. The people buried him here. I shall sit here until I starve, so that I may join him in the Hereafter."

She pointed to the pony that was tethered nearby.

"I had planned to let the pony starve, too, so I will have a horse to ride in the Hereafter. But now that you are here, you can shoot him for me, so that he need not suffer as I must do."

Cameron had already recognized the saddled and bridled horse as Roman Nose's favorite buffalo-hunting pony. If he could get this horse away from the woman he could ride to Fort Wallace and return with aid for the buckskin men.

"You must not do this thing," he began, as he sat down beside the woman. "To starve here will not help anyone. Roman Nose was a sensible man. He would not approve of what you plan. You must go back to your people. They are leaving for the north, and there will be no more fighting for a long time. The Cheyennes will go far into the country where there are no white men, and where the hunting is still good."

"Perhaps you are right," the woman said hesitantly. "I want to do only what I think Roman Nose would wish. You knew him well. He was your friend. And you tried to save him.

"But he listened to evil council. All the Cheyennes listened to evil council. White Bull meant well, but he was wrong. It was a mistake to attack the Buckskin Men. But White Bull wanted it; Tangle Hair wanted it, and those white men you call Bugle McDowell and Squawman Delaney, they wanted it.

"Now White Bull is dead," the woman concluded, "and McDowell and Delaney soon will be!"

"Was Whte Bull killed in the fighting?" Cameron asked.

"*Ai*, he was killed," the woman nodded. "He died beside Roman Nose in the great charge."

"I do not understand what you mean when you say that Delaney and McDowell will soon be dead," Cameron suggested, although he thought he realized the terrible import of her words.

"They are prisoners," the woman explained. "The Cheyennes are very angry with them for giving them evil advice. They are being carried to the north, where there will be a great medicine pow-wow and McDowell and Delaney will be tortured to death!"

JOE CAMERON shuddered to himself as he thought what that was going to mean to the two white men.

Much as he hated and despised the two renegades, Cameron felt that he should do what he could to save them. They were, after all, white men like himself.

"Roman Nose would not let this thing happen," he said to the woman. "If he were here, he would prevent the torture."

"You are right," the woman nodded, "but Roman Nose is dead, and there is no one to control the warriors."

"Perhaps we could save them, you and I," Cameron told her. "We could ride to this place in the north where the medicine pow-wow is to be held. As the widow of Roman Nose, you will command respect, and I know that some of the Dog Soldiers are my friends and will listen to what I say."

The woman thought this over for a long time. Then she said: "I cannot go. I must stay here. But there is nothing to keep you from going. The Cheyennes will not harm you, for you were the good friend of Roman Nose."

Cameron wished that he could be sure of that. With the Cheyennes in their present mood, it might go hard with any white man who fell into their

hands. And there was no sense in starting out on foot. He had to get that horse away from the woman somehow.

Of course, he could just take the horse and ride away, leaving the woman alone. But Cameron was not the kind of a man who would rob a woman of her only horse.

Cameron and the woman sat silently for a good many minutes. Presently Cameron heard hoofbeats, and over the ridge galloped two Cheyenne warriors. Joe looked to the Spencer carbine he held across his lap and, seeing that it was fully loaded, waited patiently.

As the warriors drew nearer, he recognized his old friends, Eight Horns and White Contrary, the Dog Soldiers. They held up their hands in the peace sign, and rode steadily forward.

Dismounting near the scaffold, the two warriors greeted Cameron solemnly. The widow of Roman Nose said nothing, and kept her eyes glued to the ground.

"It is good to see you mourning here," Eight Horns said to Cameron. "We have also come to sit awhile under the scaffold of Roman Nose."

"We could not leave without feeling that we had sat with him once more," White Contrary added.

The two warriors sat down cross-legged and stared fixedly at the ground for a long time. Then, evidently feeling that the amenities of the occasion had been taken care of, Eight Horns raised his head and spoke:

"It was a bad fight," he said to Cameron. "Were you on the island with the Buckskin Men?"

"I was," Cameron told him. "It was my place to be there."

"Yes," Eight Horns admitted, "a man must fight with his warrior society when his chiefs tell him to."

"It was a bad thing for the Cheyennes to get into that fight," White Contrary commented. "Even if we had taken the island, and had killed all of the Buckskin Men, it would have done no good. The Long Knives would come after us and there would have been a worse fight."

"Even now the Long Knives will be on your trail," Cameron pointed out.

"Yes," Eight Horns nodded. "they are coming already. Scouting parties of warriors have seen them. They are on the way here from Fort Wallace. Buffalo soldiers."

Buffalo Soldiers was the Cheyenne name for Negro troops, so Cameron knew that the Ninth Cavalry had taken the field. Stillwell and Trudeau must have gotten through!

"How soon will the Buffalo Soldiers be here?" Cameron asked.

"In three or four days," Eight Horns replied. "They have wagons and are coming the long way around."

As the troops were already on the way, Cameron reasoned, there was no need for him to ride to Fort Wallace. He resolved right then and there to get his hands on a horse and ride back with Eight Horns and White Contrary to try to save Delaney and McDowell.

"This woman here," Cameron began, trying to speak in the contemptuous tone any true Dog Soldier would use in speaking of a squaw, "says that Bugle McDowell and Squawman Delaney are to be killed."

"That is right," Eight Horns nodded. "And it is bad. They are to be tortured as no one has been tortured in years. When the white men hear of it, they will never forgive the Cheyenne people."

"Can't we prevent this thing?" Cameron demanded. He pointed to the horse that Roman Nose's widow had tied nearby. "If I had that pony you see there, we could ride to the north and persuade the Cheyennes not to kill these two white men."

EIGHT Horns nodded slowly and half doubtfully, but White Contrary leaped to his feet.

"We can do it!" he exclaimed. "We must do it. The Cheyennes will suffer forever if they torture these white men."

Eight Horns arose and stood for a moment, staring at Roman Nose's widow. Finally, he said: "Woman, we are taking this horse! Our friend, Cameron, needs it!"

The woman knew it was useless to object, but her eyes filled with tears.

"How many warriors died in the fight?" Cameron asked, knowing this was a piece of information that Forsyth would be glad to have. Eight Horns held up his two hands, opening and closing his fingers seven times. Then he held up one hand alone.

"Seventy-five!" Cameron exclaimed. "Do you mean that seventy-five warriors were killed?"

"That many were killed," Eight Horns nodded. "And a great many more were wounded. It was a terrible fight."

"And there's been enough of dying around here," White Contrary added. "So, come on, woman, get up and come home with us!"

The widow arose, not too reluctantly, Cameron thought, and swung up behind Eight Horns, who had already mounted his pony. Cameron untied Roman Nose's favorite buffalo horse, and in a moment, they were riding northward over the prairie. The woman clung for dear life as the ponies occasionally jumped gullies or swerved to avoid badger holes, but by loping the horses steadily until mid-afternoon, they presently came in sight of a pleasant, level stretch of prairie where women were beginning to erect the lodges for a night's encampment.

It was a small camp of perhaps thirty lodges, and as they rode closer, Cameron saw to his relief that it was the camp of the Dog Soldiers. Of all the warrior societies, the Dog Soldiers were his best friends.

As they rode into the camp circle and drew rein, Roman Nose's widow slipped from Eight Horn's pony and disappeared among the lodges. A group of warriors gathered around, and among them was the ancient Tangle Hair.

"You should not have come here," Tangle Hair said to Cameron. "McDowell and Delaney are to be tortured, and you will not like to see it!"

"I came to try to prevent it," Cameron replied, frankly.

"It is no use!" Tangle Hair shook his head. "I have tried to prevent it, but the warriors will not listen to me!"

"Eight Horns and White Contrary think as we do," Cameron told the old man. "Perhaps if all four of us talk against it, we can persuade the others."

"Those two white men deserve to die!" a tall warrior grunted.

"I agree with you," Cameron said. "But, as White Contrary said a while ago, enough men have died around here lately. And nothing was gained by their dying!"

"The reason all these men died is because McDowell and Delaney came among us with their bad talk!" a warrior insisted. "They are to blame, and White Bull was to blame. White Bull has died, and now these two white men must die!"

"They are not alone to blame," Cameron pointed out. "It was Roman Nose who thought he could stop the Iron Horse. What a foolish thought! For many moons, the Cheyennes have had nothing but foolish thoughts, and look at the trouble this foolishness has caused.

"Now you would do another foolish thing, and cause yourselves more trouble! The mighty Dog Soldiers have become people who think like women and act like children!"

AN angry mutter arose from the assembled warriors, and a chief named Big Head strode forward, shouting:

"What more trouble can we be in than we are in now? The Long Knives will chase after us, and they will attack our camps and destroy our lodges!"

"The Long Knives are warriors, like the Dog Soldiers," Cameron replied. "A fair fight is a fair fight, and no one holds a grudge, especially when he is the winner. But if you torture to death two white men, the white chiefs will be very angry. They do not like McDowell and Delaney, but they will feel that white men are white men, and should not be tortured to death!"

"What this man says is true!" cried a big, burly Dog Soldier, and several

others nodded agreement.

"No one but a fool would tease a wounded bear," Tangle Hair said. "The whites are wounded and angry, and it is best to go away for a time and leave them alone!"

"Perhaps you are right," said Big Head, the chief, and Cameron knew that he had won. "Cameron has been our friend for years; he would not lie to us. We will turn these two white men loose on the prairie, and tell them to go away and stay away. We do not want to see them again!"

"Their guns must be given back to them," Cameron suggested, "or they cannot hunt, and will starve."

"They can take their guns," Big Head agreed, as all the warriors moved off toward a lodge in the center of the camp circle.

When Joe Cameron entered the lodge with Big Head and Tangle Hair, he saw that Bugle McDowell and Squawman Delaney lay on the ground, bound hand and foot. McDowell looked up and sneered.

"Come to gloat over us, eh?" he grunted. "Wal, I dunno as I blame you."

"You win!" Delaney added. "And since we tried to kill you, I reckon you'll enjoy seein' us tortured!"

"It might be fun, at that!" Cameron replied in a voice heavy with contempt. Then he drew his knife and stooped down to slash the bonds that held the men's feet together.

Warriors seized the men and jerked them roughly to their feet. Their ankles had been tightly bound for so long they could scarcely walk, and they half staggered, were half dragged out into the sunlight.

Delaney's face grew white as death, but he said nothing. The dim-witted McDowell began to blubber and cry out in protest.

"Aw, shut up!" Cameron told him. "You aren't going to be hurt!"

Then he cut the buckskin thongs that bound the two men's wrists. A couple of warriors, who had gone for the white men's guns and bullet pouches, now came up and thrust the weapons into their hands. Delaney gasped in amazement.

"You mean they're turnin' us loose?" he demanded.

Tangle Hair understood no English, but the white man's meaning was plain.

"We are letting you go," he said in Cheyenne, "because our friend, Cameron, wants it that way. He has persuaded the warriors that it would be foolish to kill you!"

"Wal, I'll be doggoned!" Delaney exclaimed, in English. "Cameron, I reckon I've had you figgered all wrong!"

"Reckon you have!" Cameron nodded. "Now get out of here, and stay out! No one cares where you go or what you do, just as long as you keep away from the Cheyennes!"

"We'll do that, all right," Delaney agreed.

The two renegades turned and hobbled off as rapidly as their numbed feet would let them. Cameron stood among the Dog Soldiers and watched them until they disappeared over a distant ridge. Then he turned to Eight Horns.

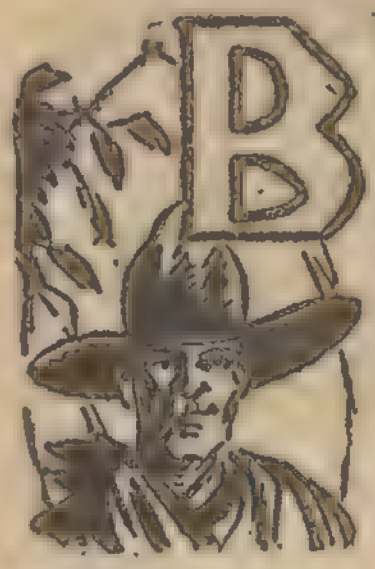
"I have not eaten anything but spoiled horse meat and a little wolf soup for several days," he said.

"Come," Eight Horns laughed. "My woman will have buffalo hump!"

Cameron spent the night in Eight Horns' lodge. Next morning, still riding Roman Nose's buffalo horse, which the Dog Soldiers had decided he should keep, he started back for the island.

CHAPTER XVI

Buffalo Soldiers!



BY the morning of the ninth day after the beginning of the battle, Joe Cameron reached the island. As he trotted up to the handful of Buckskin Men huddled behind their barricade of rotting horses, Pueblo Jones and Bearfoot Gorman stepped out to hail him.

"Where'd you get the hoss?" Bearfoot asked.

"Tell you later," Cameron replied, dismounting. "Where's Colonel Forsyth?"

Forsyth was in agony from his wounds, but he put up a brave front as Cameron reported the results of his scouting expedition.

"Roman Nose is dead," Joe explained. "And the Indians are headin' north. They won't attack the island again. They told me that Buffalo Soldiers are coming, which is their name for Negro troops, so I reckon the Ninth Cavalry is on the way to rescue us."

"If they don't come soon there won't be anyone left to rescue," Forsyth commented.

"Perhaps we can hurry it up," Cameron suggested, "I got a horse now, so why can't I ride to Fort Wallace and get help?"

"I was going to ask you to do that," Forsyth said.

"My horse has had a hard trip, Colonel," Cameron pointed out. "I'll picket him and let him graze for an hour or so. Then I'll hurry to Wallace."

While his tired horse was grazing in the tall grass, Cameron sat cross-legged on the ground and told Pueblo Jones and Beartoot Gorman everything that had transpired since he left the island.

The old mountain men agreed that Cameron had done right in saving McDowell and Delaney from the torture.

"I holds no brief for those skunks," Bearfoot commented, "but they are white men, and hadn't ought to be burned by Injuns."

The men were dawdling weakly about the island, but as the day grew warmer, a few made a feeble effort to wander out into the valley in the forlorn hope of finding something to shoot. Suddenly one of the men, who had climbed the ridge south of the island, let out a long-drawn, piercing yell.

Every man who was able scrambled to his feet and stood staring toward where the man was pointing. Far off across the prairie, a black dot bobbed and swayed and moved. Presently, smaller black dots appeared around it, swept passed it, and moved toward the island.

Scarcely daring to believe his eyes, and more than half fearing that the dots were Indians, Cameron stood silently, watching the dots slowly grow larger. The largest dot, being considerably bigger than the others, was first to become recognizable, and a man shouted:

"Look! It's an ambulance!"

Men still hesitated to believe their eyes. But now, as the smaller dots crept nearer, the sun began to pick up the twinkle and glint of metal accoutrements. Then blue coats became plainly visible, and the red and white flapping of a tiny flag.

Within half an hour, the whole valley echoed to the roar of hoofs as Company H, Ninth United States Cavalry, galloped up to the island, their ambulance and supply wagons bouncing behind.

The Buckskin Men, famed for their silent and undemonstrative ways, broke down completely. Men laughed and cried, men shouted and cheered, men seized the grinning Negro troopers and hugged them as though they had been long-lost brothers.

The hungry scouts fell upon the supply wagons like looting warriors, and began to wolf down hardtack and bacon. But some of the older and more experienced hands, aided by the troopers, made them stop. Then the bacon was cooked, coffee was made, and food was doled out to the starving men in saner quantities that would not make them ill.

After a good night's sleep and a hearty breakfast, the Buckskin Men expected to start back for Fort Wallace. But Doctor Fitzgerald, surgeon of the Ninth, decreed that the wounded could not be moved. So a new camp was pitched beyond the south ridge to get away from the sickening odor of rotting horse. Here for two days, the Buckskin Men rested, ate, and gave their wounded a chance to gather strength.

ON the third day, the trip back to Fort Wallace was begun, and five days after that, the dusty column wound

down through the little post and halted before the military hospital.

The Buckskin Legion had been given up for lost, and the return of the detachment was hailed with delight. A thousand questions had to be asked and answered before the unwounded men were free to do as they pleased.

After the excitement of the arrival had died down a bit, Cameron was walking across the parade ground when he saw Sharp Grover standing in the dust talking with Bugle McDowell! Cameron's amazement at seeing the squawman turned to a surging anger as he strode toward the two men. After the part that Bugle had played in recent events, Cameron had not thought the renegade would dare show his face in a white man's town.

Before Cameron reached the spot, Sharp Grover turned on his heel and walked away, leaving McDowell alone. As Cameron came up, Bugle spoke easily:

"Howdy, Cameron. Right glad to see you again!"

"Well, I'm not glad to see you!" Cameron snorted. "Thought I told you to clear out of this country."

"That's right, you did," Bugle nodded. "And we were clearin' out, me and Delaney. But I sort of changed my mind."

"Did, huh?" Cameron grunted. "Maybe I can change it back again for you!"

"Now, wait a minute, Cameron!" McDowell protested. "I ain't forgettin' what you done for me, and I came back because I can help you. Sort of do somethin' to make up for your savin' me from the torture."

"What you drivin' at?" Cameron demanded.

"Last night, me an' Delaney pulled in here from Fort Hayes," McDowell replied. "And when we got here, we was well heeled with gold!"

Quick suspicion flashed into Cameron's mind. "You say you been to Fort Hayes was where you left *your* gold, gold, huh?"

"Yeah." McDowell nodded. "Fort Hayes, an' now you got a poke full of wasn't it?"

"It was," Cameron agreed. "The army gave me a receipt an' Bill Comstock had that receipt the day he was killed. But when we found Bill's body, the receipt was gone!"

"Seems funny the Injuns would take a paper like that!" Bugle McDowell stated.

"Yeah," Cameron said. "The Sioux can't read!"

"No," McDowell agreed. "But Squawman Delaney can!"

Cameron stared at the renegade for a long moment. Then his jaw muscles tightened, and his eyes grew hard and cold.

"Look, McDowell, stop beatin' around the bush!" he gritted. "If you got somethin' to tell me, go ahead and spit it out!"

"What do I have to do; draw you a picture?" McDowell snorted. "Can't you see I'm tryin' to tell you? Squawman Delaney was with the Sioux who killed Bill Comstock. He found the receipt for your gold, and saw right away what it was. So he kept it, tellin' nobody.

"After you saved us from the torture, Delaney and I were picked up by a small supply train headed for Fort Hayes. We'd been walkin' for three days, and were plumb glad to get a ride to any place. On the way in, Delaney told me why he was particular anxious to get to Hayes.

"Delaney took the receipt to Sheridan's headquarters, an' a sergeant who was on duty had to turn your gold over to him."

"That would be right," Cameron nodded. "The receipt wasn't made out to me personally. It just read: "Pay to bearer."

McDowell nodded. "Sure. So it was easy for Delaney to get your gold. When we got back here, I started thinkin' how you saved our lives, an' I couldn't go through with it, even though Delaney offered to split the stuff with me. I wanted him to turn the gold back to you. He wouldn't do it, and we quarrelled. So he went on to California, takin' your gold with him, an' I stayed here.

"I happen to know he'll be stoppin' in Denver for a spell," McDowell concluded. "You could overtake him there, easy."

"If I thought you was tellin' the truth, I'd go streamin' out after Delaney right now," Joe Cameron muttered. "But if I find out you been lying—"

THE sharp report of a rifle sent echoes clapping back and forth across the parade ground. Bugle McDowell stood motionless, a look of utter amazement on his slowly whitening face. Then he pitched forward, rolled over, and lay still.

Cameron's six-gun flashed into his hand, and he crouched, eyes sweeping the buildings that lined the parade ground. A man ran along the flat roof of a low adobe barracks, and Cameron recognized Squawman Delaney.

It was a far shot for a six-gun, and Delaney was running swiftly. But as he reached the edge of the roof, instead of jumping immediately to the ground, Delaney hesitated, then sat down with his feet dangling over the side of the building, preparatory to letting himself down easily.

In that instant, Cameron's gun barked twice. Delaney toppled forward, and when he hit the ground, he did not get up.

Cameron slid his gun back into the holster, and bent over Bugle McDowell. He saw at once that the man was dead.

The shooting had brought men running, and as soldiers and scouts gathered around, the Officer of the Day came up.

When he learned from Cameron what had happened, he dispatched a few soldiers across the parade ground to where Delaney lay. Then he turned his attention to Bugle McDowell.

"Carry him into the hospital," he ordered. "He apparently is dead, but get the surgeon to look at him at once."

Cameron strode across the parade ground to where the soldiers were bending over Squawman Delaney.

"This feller don't need no help," a soldier told him. "He's done cashed in his chips. Nice shootin'!" He nodded to

[Turn page]

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Cameron. "Must be a good hundred yards from where you was standin', an' both shots plugged him plumb center!"

"Who was he?" the Officer of the Day demanded, as he reached the spot.

"He was a feller called Squawman Delancy," Cameron explained. "He was a renegade, and was fighting against us back at the island. Bugle McDowell and he were pals for years."

"Then why did Delaney shoot McDowell?" the officer wondered.

"That's a long story," Cameron grunted. "But if you'll look under this Delaney's dirty shirt, I think you'll find a money-belt containin' three thousand dollars in gold belonging to me!"

But when Delaney's body was searched, there was no money-belt, and no gold.

"He hid it somewhere, probably," Cameron stated. "And I'll likely never find it, now."

BEARFOOT GORMAN and Pueblo Jones, who had followed the soldiers as they carried Bugle McDowell into the hospital, now came running across the parade ground.

"Hey, Cameron!" Bearfoot called. "McDowell was wearing a money-belt with a heap of gold in it! Reckon it's yours?"

"So that's why he was castin' suspicion on Delaney!" Cameron exclaimed. "Sending me off on a wild goose chase to Denver, and he with my gold wrapped around his middle the whole time! Somehow or other he swindled Delaney out of the stuff. Then, thinkin' the Squawman had left town, McDowell tried to put me on his trail!"

"How are you going to prove it's your gold?" Pueblo wondered.

"I'll prove it, all right!" Cameron snapped.

But Colonel Carpenter, commander of the post, was dubious.

"It may be difficult to prove that this gold is yours," he told Cameron. "All you can do now is put in a claim for it. If you could establish that these renegades used your receipt to obtain possession of your gold, then we'll have to turn this money over to you."

That afternoon, Cameron set out for Fort Hayes, accompanied by Jones and Gorman. The three scouts rode horses lent to them by the cavalry. At the fort, a brief investigation revealed that a commissary sergeant had turned Cameron's gold over to two men, and when the squawmen were described to him, he readily agreed that they had been the culprits.

Colonel Custer was appealed to, and he took Cameron to General Sheridan.

"I'll give you an order on Colonel Carpenter," Fighting Phil said, when he had heard the evidence. "He will turn the gold over to you on demand."

"So that clears up everything," said Bearfoot Gorman, as they left Sheridan's headquarters. But before they were half way back to the hitching-rail where their horses were tied, a running trooper of the Seventh Cavalry overtook them.

"Colonel Custer's compliments," the trooper said, "an' he wants to see you fellers in his tent."

"What's the play, soldier?" Cameron asked.

"Seems some Injun named Black Kettle is on the warpath down south in Injun Territory," the trooper explained. "Heard the colonel talkin' somethin' about a winter campaign."

Cameron looked at Bearfoot Gorman and Pueblo Jones.

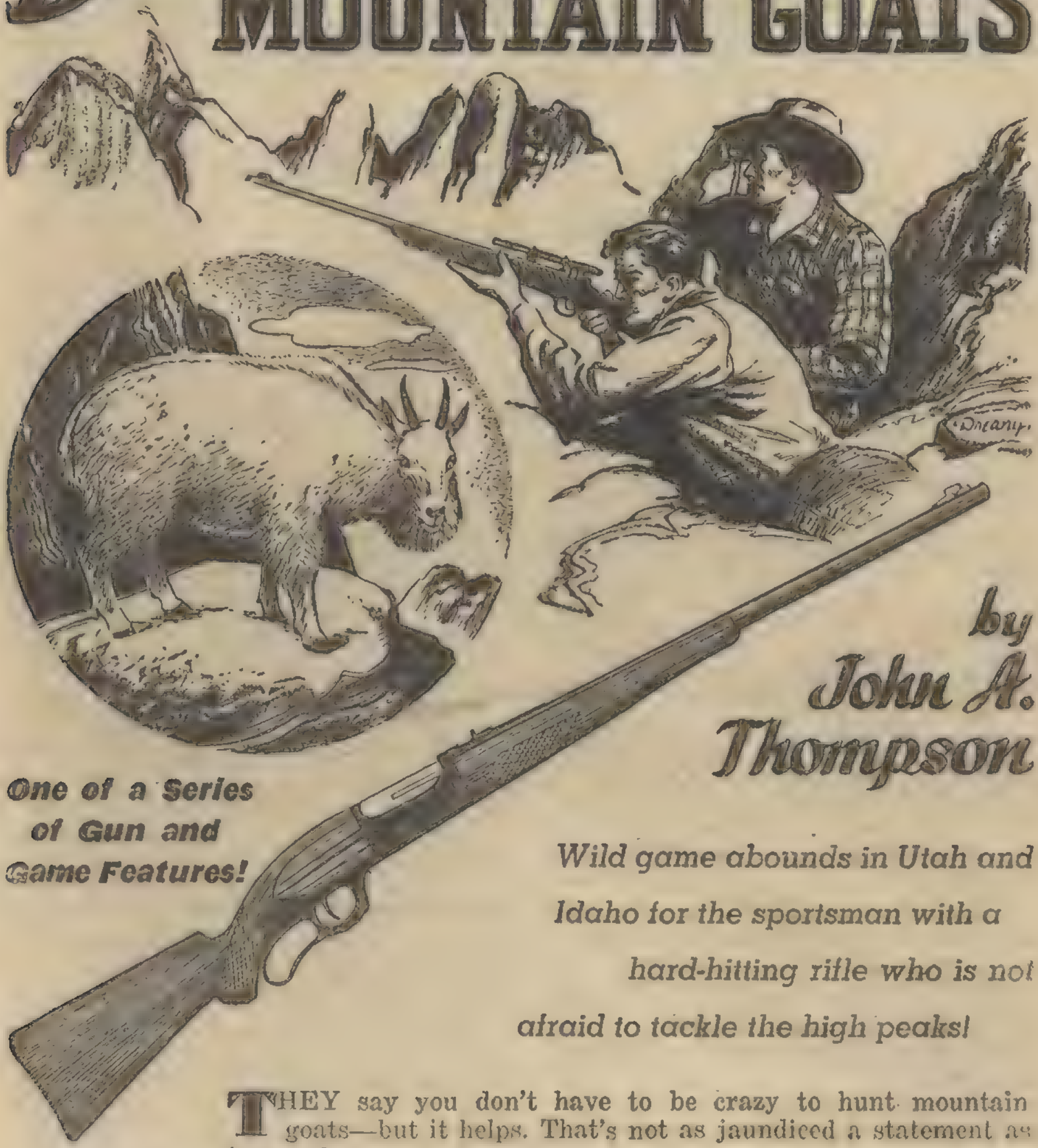
"Well, come along, fellers," he grunted. "Here we go again!"

Next Issue's Featured Novel

WILD HORSE RANGE

By B. M. BOWER

Bagging MOUNTAIN GOATS



by John A. Thompson

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Wild game abounds in Utah and Idaho for the sportsman with a hard-hitting rifle who is not afraid to tackle the high peaks!

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THEY say you don't have to be crazy to hunt mountain goats—but it helps. That's not as jaundiced a statement as it sounds.

With many other big game animals dwindling to pinpoint proportions in the West, the sturdy, comical-faced Rocky Mountain goat is the only denizen of the Western frontier country which modern hunters have neither scared from his original habitat nor cut down appreciably in numbers. Civilization has

made little impression on the big billies.

It is not that the average hunter minds a stalk of a mile or so in his efforts to bring down a trophy specimen of any big game animal. What he objects to is that in the case of mountain goats that mile or two is apt to be straight up. The critters live in perennially snowswept penthouses atop the highest ridges of the Rockies. They are tough hombres. And tough to get within your gunsights.

The Rockies themselves are rough mountains to scale. From 70 to 100 miles wide and more than 1,000 miles long, this great chain of towering barrier rocks stretches from Canada deep into our own West. Its serrated ranges holding some 50 separate peaks reaching more than 11,000 feet above sea level afford the sort of alpine country mountain goats thrive in—a land of dizzy ridges rising razor-sharp against the sky.

You can get a guide to take you into goat country. He can set up as comfortable a base camp as anybody would want in some high mountain basin. But you have to climb the ridges and comb them for your quarry yourself. No pack train can make it. No horse can carry you, swaying in the saddle, to the crest of the knife-edge crags where the Rocky Mountain goats are the lonely, silent monarchs of all they survey.

Goats Live Near Peaks

Feeding mostly on moss and short grass growing on otherwise bare rocks the big billies live so far above timberline they are practically immune from raids by bears or wolves, though a golden eagle may make off with a young kid now and then. And by some peculiar sixth sense the goats seem to have learned to avoid another hazard to their continued survival—the swift, murderous snowslides of late winter and early spring.

As for two-legged hunters, the old daddy goats—if you have ever watched them through glasses as you inched over the rocks trying to get close enough for a clear shot—seem deliberately to pooh-pooh that menace to their safety. They will watch or sniff a hunter approaching them from below with so little excitement it amounts almost to disdain. Even when they are sufficiently alarmed to decide retreat is the better part of valor, they will move away—generally out of gunshot range—with the annoying calm of a skunk crossing a crowded highway.

All right, so you get excited and let fly. Does that faze the big billy? Does he make off like a frightened, bounding deer? No. He retreats at his own dignified pace. But, and here's the rub, he always seems to know exactly which crag or up-jutting rock he wants to get behind—and the shortest way to get there.

In less time than you would think, he's lost somewhere among the top crags where it isn't humanly possible to follow him. And no doubt giving the goat equivalent of the derisive thumb-to-nose gesture at the hunter who tried so laboriously to negotiate the rocky heights leading to his lair.

If the goats would only act just a little scared, man's vanity at least would be flattered. But as a rule they won't give a hunter even that superficial accolade. Of all the wild game animals I know, a Rocky Mountain goat can get your goat quicker than any other. And he seems to do it on purpose.

They appear to sense the fact that in the first place few hunters have the wind, nerve and stamina necessary to scale the crags in which they live. And fewer the ability to bring them down at ranges that may be anywhere from 100 to 400 yards, in spite of 'scope sights and the near-miracle firepower of modern sporting rifles.

How right they are! A few seasons ago, of more than 600 sportsmen avowedly out to bag their billy in a popular mountain goat hunting section of British Columbia, figures show that barely 50 were able to come home with a trophy head, and the right to mark "Mission Accomplished" on their expedition. That same year and in the same general wilderness area over 400

moose were brought in.

After all a fellow doesn't have to cling to cliffs and hang on by his eyelids when he is trying a shot for a moose. Moose can be got on the level—geographically speaking.

All of which makes bagging a big billy a real challenge to any high country wilderness big game hunter. The sportsman who hasn't tried for a Rocky Mountain goat has missed the sort of hunting that comes just once in a lifetime. Goats, by the way, live far above the normal range of mountain sheep.

Idaho Is Home For Goats

In our own wilderness West there is fine goat country in the rugged Pahsimeroi range north of Sun Valley, Idaho and in the towering Sawtooth, Bitterroot and Salmon River mountains. In fact that whole general region is a veritable big game hunter's paradise. It is a vast, almost roadless area of high peaked mountains, pine forests, cup lakes, racing white-water rivers and tumbling mountain streams. With the famous Sun Valley Lodge as a jumping-off place, you can get into the big game country virtually overnight.

There are mountain goats in Montana too in designated high mountain areas in Flathead, Lewis and Clark, Missoula and Powell counties—and elsewhere. Northern Wyoming and parts of Alaska as well, of course, as the peaks of the Rockies in British Columbia up in Canada are also included in the mountain goats' general range.

How big are the big billies? What sort of animals are they anyhow? You seldom see them in zoos (they don't take kindly to captivity), so those are fair questions.

A 300-pound male Rocky Mountain goat is over average, a 350-pounder exceptional. Though specially large, fat specimens have been credited with weighing close to 500 pounds that is baby buffalo size and extremely rare. The jump-of-the-crag billies probably tip the scales at about 250, whiskers and all. Females average 200 pounds or under.

Experts say the Rocky Mountain goat is not a goat at all. He is, strictly speaking, a mountain chamois distantly related to the famous peak-to-peak leaping chamois of the Alps. But he lacks the chamois' grace, and also the majesty of the Bighorn sheep.

In appearance the mountain goat is the clown of the big game kingdom. He perpetually holds his long, quizzical face lower than his high, stooped shoulders. His ears flop out sideways. His long whiskers often drag almost to the ground. And for the final topper the thick white hair on his front legs make him look, head-on, as if he had forgotten to wear a belt and his pants were coming down.

A snow-white mountain goat skin makes a grand—and rare—den trophy. Early tribes of northern Indians used to make prized blankets from Rocky Mountain goat wool.

Don't try cooking a full grown mountain goat unless you have a strong stomach—or are mighty hungry. The meat of a mature animal is coarse, whang-leather tough and potent as Limburger. I know. I tackled it—once. The meat of young kids on the other hand is okay, even excellent camp grub.

Why does anyone hunt Rocky Mountain goats? Partly because of the challenge they offer a big game sportsman. And because of the fine trophy heads a successful hunt affords.

Horns Are Sharp

The horns of a mountain goat are stilletto sharp, and gleaming black. Anything over a 10-inch horn makes a trophy well worth bragging about, once you have the head mounted and hanging in your cabin, or study. The record for a mountain goat is horns 12½ inches long with a 5½-inch circumference at the base. The animal was killed in British Columbia quite a few years ago by A. Bryan Williams. Incidentally it was a female, not a billy goat.

That is another unusual fact about mountain goats. There is little difference in size between the horns of the two sexes. The horns of the female,

however, are usually not as large or as wrinkled at the base as those of the male. Head and horns of either sex are considered satisfactory as trophies, though sportsmen usually try for a billy and leave the nannies alone to tend to their chore of kid raising.

Once you have left your base camp and scrambled up the crags to the high rocks the mountain goats live in the hunter does get a few breaks. For one thing the goats' brilliant white coats and the fact that they are almost always found out in the open makes them easy to locate. You can spot them, even without glasses, a good distance away. Another help is that unless you move deliberately and clumsily directly towards them they are slow to take alarm.

Furthermore individual goats are not extensive rangers. It has been estimated they seldom travel more than a few miles—perhaps five at most—from their home peaks. And though a Rocky Mountain goat's eyesight is good, he seems to depend much less on his sense of scent as a danger warning than do most big game animals.

Perhaps man scent doesn't fidget him as it does other wild creatures. Practical advantage can be taken of this. The hunter need not bother too much about wind direction in stalking a big billy, although I wouldn't advise moving directly towards a goat with the wind blowing straight from the hunter to his quarry. Maybe that is just a matter of general principle in stalking wild game. Habit, more than anything else. Nevertheless it is a good habit to develop. Other game animals are not as callous, or as blunt-scented as the Rocky Mountain goat.

Against this the big billy hunter has certainly to be a physically fit hombre. Getting into goat country from a base camp is apt to entail real hardship. Even personal risk to life and limb in scaling some of the steeper cliffs. Chances are there will be not only windswept days on the high crests but a night or two as well on some cold, bleak and shelterless rock ridge. All you will have with you is your gun, your binoculars, and what you can carry on your back. It's rugged.

Climbing Skill Is Essential

But provided you have the ability to climb and skin along rock ledges that may be barely a foot wide—and idea of looking down great heights doesn't make you dizzy—you have, once you are in goat country—a good chance to bring back the trophy head you went after.

Unlike other types of mountain stalking for big game, Bighorn sheep hunting for instance, the usually sound idea of reaching a position higher than your quarry, then closing in on him from above is not so generally feasible in the case of mountain goats.

To start with your big billy is likely to be located either standing on an outjutting pinnacle so high up it would take another goat to out-top him, or perhaps lying down on the crest of a sharp-edged ridge where he can watch both slopes and take off down either one. There is also this consideration attested to by many experienced guides and goat hunters. Though so far as I know there is no scientific explanation for it, it seems to hold true that goats become more alarmed by the presence of anyone or anything *above* them than they do of some unexpected trespasser on a level that is below them.

Goat nature, I guess. The animals feel they can always attain safety by climbing higher into the rocky peaks than anything on two or four feet can follow. But something already above them is a jolt to their serenity.

Then too, frightened goats can go downhill in tremendous, hair-raising 20-foot jumps from one ledge or landing to the next. They are the most surefooted of all the hoofed animals in the world. It is fascinating to watch them make their long leaps. No skidding, sliding stop and a quick balancing act to keep from tumbling headlong off their chosen perch, but a perfect, four-point landing as direct and steady as a bird lighting on the limb of a tree.

Moving uphill, goats retreat in a slower and more orderly fashion. This

makes it easier for the hunter to follow them. Besides if you are not too noisy or sudden in your movements it is sometimes possible to traverse a high valley or basin in full view of goats on the higher cliff ledges without seriously alarming the animals.

They may shift position a little, generally to a pinnacle from which they can get a wider view, but that is about all.

However when you start any direct approach towards the billy you have picked out as your special trophy head, keep out of sight as much as possible and use all the stalking skill at your command. A successful stalk will eliminate the further, arduous, final (and sometimes impossible) climb to the topmost peaks, or having to follow your billy over the ridge and into the next valley, which likely as not will be tougher terrain than the ground you are already in.

Mountain goats have a knack of leading you from bad country into worse. Seldom the reverse.

If you must go over a ridge, don't whatever you do forget the location of your mountain camp. A man can get lost surprisingly easily, especially if snow begins to fall, in craggy mountain tops once he is out of sight of camp far below him, or loses track of its positive direction.

Choose Suitable Gun

And a word of warning about guns. Take along a rifle with plenty of shocking power. Goats for their size are difficult animals to kill. Their fur is thick, and their hide both thick and tough. Bullets that should penetrate seem to lack punch on a Rocky Mountain goat. Later examination often shows that the lead has simply penetrated the skin and lodged a few inches inside the flesh.

Against this and in the hunter's favor is the mountain goat's peculiarly phlegmatic character. Even when flesh-stung a big billy frequently fails to show alarm. He may stand around, swinging his piggy eyes from one side to the other awhile. Or move off at a slow, bemused walk. Either way it allows the hunter time for further shots.

The best gun for goats is probably a .30-06 using a high speed 150-grain bullet. Something in the bullet line with an initial zip of 3,000 feet per second, or close to it. Besides shocking power the fast bullets have a fairly flat trajectory. This is important in avoiding undershooting or overshooting due to errors in judging the long range distances at which mountain goats are generally fired on.

Two excellent goat guns are the .30-06 Winchester Model 70, and the .30-06 Remington Model 721.

Some goat hunters who prefer a lighter caliber rifle are likely to choose a .270 Winchester, using a 130-grain bullet. High speed of course. The Western Cartridge Company's Super-X Silvertip .270 Winchester 130-grain bullet has a rated muzzle velocity of 3,140 feet per second. In the hands of a cool hunter and a good shot it will get the job done on the toughest, most phelgmatic big billy in the mountains.

The .250-3000 Savage and the .257 Roberts are also favorite Rocky Mountain goat guns.

Armed with an adequate rifle and given the ability to climb rock peaks so steep they may mean toe-hold and fingertip grips, most any sportsman or big game hunter willing to tackle big billy country ought to be able to come back with a worthwhile trophy head. A lot depends on his enthusiasm for mountain climbing. The number of failures is not always the goats' fault. They're around. But too often the hunter fails to get up high enough, or deep enough into the mountain crags to bring himself into real goat territory.

On the other hand goats can and have been taken with relative ease when they have been encountered doing some late summer feeding in a high basin, or small timberline meadow at the base of the cliffs that are their natural range, and where the really big billies with the worthwhile trophy heads generally live.

I remember many years ago visiting a camp that I came upon suddenly at the edge of a small sky blue lake high in the Sawtooth Mountains in the wilderness country of central Idaho. It was a cirque lake that formed the headwaters of a mountain stream I had been following upward through the thinning pines. About one half its circumference was flanked by a narrow, lush grass meadow. The other half lapped against a steeply rising talus slope that widened out like a buttress at the base of a towering, jagged rock cliff.

Good Goat Country

The cliff and the peaks behind it looked like good goat country. They were. My host and I were sitting on a flat rock at the meadow edge of the lake smoking our pipes when, about an hour before sundown, a whole pack train of goats—billies, nannies and kids—emerged from some crevice near the top of the cliff and began descending it along a ledge trail too narrow for a man, or even a fat-bellied mountain sheep to travel on.

There must have been between 25 or 30 goats in all. They moved down the ledge as calmly as if they were walking along a four lane highway. Now and then a billy would pause on a rocky point and, head low in usual goat fashion, survey the lake below. Once or twice a goat friskier, or thirstier than the rest would break ranks and instead of following the hairpin curves of the downward winding trail take a shortcut by making a spectacular jump straight from one ledge level to the next one below it. They landed beautifully, often on places where a slip would have meant a high fall off the cliff to the sharp talus below.

My host and I kept still as the goats came down to water. A few of them nibbled at the stubby grass growths spotted here and there on the talus slope. A few others wandered towards the meadow side of the lake. Part way around they suddenly became aware of two men sitting on the rock, or of the camp, and stopped short.

A couple of nannies and an old, yellow-bearded billy appeared to go into an almost human huddle, deliberating whether to come closer, stay where they were, or retreat. Their blinky-eyed meditation and solemn chin-whisker wagging took a long time. Finally they decided on the middle course. They stayed where they were, turned their posteriors towards us in open insult and began picking at the grass.

I was on a pack trip at the time, carrying in a back-pack all the necessities for one-man mountain travel. Two light but good wool blankets, a light ax, compass, waterproofed matches, length of fishline and assorted hooks, folding army style mess kit, extra socks and underwear, towel, soap, toothbrush, safety-razor and small round shaving mirror. In addition there were staple footstuffs, rice, sugar, dried beans, bacon, tea, salt and some raisins—the raisins excellent for adding to boiled rice, or munching on as a noonday energy snack.

Two army style shelter cloths formed an outer wrapping for the pack during daytime travel, and joined together made a pup tent to sleep under at night.

Besides the above I carried a pair of battered binoculars and a good big game rifle, a .30-06 Winchester.

Many Camp Comforts

My host had a wall-type tent set up, complete with an outdoor fireplace built in front of it and off to one side. The camp looked as if he intended staying there for some time.

We watched the mountain goats until it was almost sundown and talked fishing, hunting and the great Western outdoors in general. Most of the time I had my eyes on a big billy feeding across a corner of the lake, perhaps 150 yards away. His gnarled horns would measure, I was sure, 11 inches at least. Perhaps 12. What a trophy his fuzzy head would make!

I could see just how he would look in my gunsights set for a line shot that would break his neck instantaneously.

But I didn't get a goat that day. I didn't even go for my gun.

Goats were out of season. And be-

sides, my host was a Forest Ranger.

He was, he told me, making a Washington-ordered big game survey in that particular section of Idaho. And I'm no dope. I had no intention of tangling with Uncle Sam over a Rocky Mountain billy goat—even if he was the finest specimen I have ever seen before or since.

Several years later I came back to the place with Big Jim Goody, an old Idaho trapper, hunter and all around mountaineer. Goats were in season. It was early fall, cold and light snow fell from a dull gray sky as we reached the little cirque lake. This time we rode up to the lake, each of us leading our own pack animal carrying our camp gear and duffle. There was still plenty of grass in the high meadow for forage for our animals, and we figured we would need them to pack our trophy heads and goat skins out. And maybe a dressed deer for venison.

"Okay," said Jim peering at the empty cliff through the haze of snow, "where are them goats? You said this was one time goat hunting was going to be easy. Remember?"

I remembered.

For two days we waited. One or two old billies showed themselves at the top of the cliff, beyond sure gunshot range. None came down to drink or feed at the lake. It snowed most of the time.

Some Mountain Goat Habits

The third day the snow stopped sifting down—definitely. Wind cleared the sky of scudding clouds, and the sun came out. Jim Goody roused himself.

"Did you also happen to think," he said, "that it was summer when you saw those goats grazing down here, and that goats—unlike most other big game animals—instead of coming off the mountains to lower ground in winter always work up higher to the top ridges where they're safest? They can get ample snow for water then, and rock moss and dried short grass does them well enough for winter feed."

After he let that sink in, the old boy added: "Come on. Make up a light pack while the weather's good. If goats can get up that cliff, I reckon we can—somehow. If we can't make the ledge trail we'll circle around the wall 'till we find an easier route up into them top peaks."

We circled the cliffs, and found an easier route. And we spent one night in the open on the snow-crusted, sharp-edged crest of a tongue ridge so narrow that a restless sleeper could have rolled himself off into eternity before he even woke up. We ate cold sandwiches for breakfast the next morning, made of skillet size flapjacks wrapped and folded around a thick filling of cold red kidney beans—stuff we had carried with us from our camp by the lake.

But we got our goats. Not the fine specimen I had seen before feeding at the lake. But an above average trophy head apiece. Both billies. We could have brought down another good set of horns. But they were on a female, and we decided to let the nannies go.

Moreover after getting the heads off and skinning out the carcasses we had enough to lug back as it was.

Foresightedly Big Jim added a haunch of goat meat to his load. Before we reached our camp at the lake it really began to snow. We were holed up there for almost a week. And I had my chance to taste Rocky Mountain goat meat—for the first and last time, I hope.

Finally when our pack animals were loaded and we were ready to tackle the trail down out of the mountains, Goody turned to me, a quiet, satisfied smile on his whiskered face.

"You know," he said, "I just figured out why so many mountain goats must die of old age. Hunting the cusses is hard work. But hanged if it isn't worth it."

I glanced at the trophy heads atop the loads on our pack horses. I guess I was grinning. That was the way I felt about it too. And still do.

Next Issue: SHOTGUNS AND DUCKS, by JOHN A. THOMPSON

Marshal McLain tries to prove the hand of the law can break the grip of injustice in a hostile town!

HIRED GUN

By BARRY SCOBEE

HIS daily trick as town marshal was from three o'clock in the afternoon until the last roisterer had turned in for the night.

At five minutes to three he laid down his magazine, buckled on his belt-gun, set his moderate-size hat on his head, and opened the door of his little two-room house. He paused there, dreading to take the few steps to the street and go along the board sidewalk.

For virtually no one in this town

spoke to him except from necessity. On this windy November Saturday afternoon, the people that he met now, barely nodded, or kept their eyes straight ahead, scornfully ignoring him. There was but one man who might be termed a friend and that was the mayor who had employed him a week ago.

Three blocks of hit-and-skip vacant lots and unpainted board houses and he turned in at the first business place, as he did each day for any new instructions. It was the boot and saddle shop of Mayor Holcomb. That official was sitting on his low bench, using two needles, running waxed thread through the soles of a fancy boot.

"Harry DeLocke," he said, without looking up, "killed Bolton Jones early this morning."

MARSHAL Foss McLain hung his hat on the ear of a cane-bottom chair and settled his stocky muscular body into the seat. "In town?" he asked.

"Out in the Two-Bit ranch country."

"Who is Bolton Jones?"

"One of the little ranchers out there being foreclosed on."

"DeLocke's in jail?"

"Hasn't been arrested. And Layhee is not going to arrest him, you can bet your bottom dollar on that."

Holcomb picked up a square-end, sway-blade, steel leather knife and clipped the threads close to the soles. He took up a spool of white linen thread and spread his arms, reeling off a length. With vehement motions he ran this repeatedly across his striated cake of beeswax.

"I've about got my fill of DeLocke," he went on, sternly. "This isn't the first man he's killed. Free on the streets! Claiming self-defense. Oh, there may be some excuse. Jones pulled his gun all right. But DeLocke was the aggressor. He was on Jones' land, or what was his land yesterday before the foreclosure. I want him arrested."

"How about jurisdiction?" the marshal asked. "If it happened out in the county."

Holcomb sighted with one eye, threading his needle. Without waiting for a reply McLain went to another subject.

"Mayor— There's something queer in this town. Practically nobody at all speaks to me. They ignore me—uh, *spurn* me."

"I know." Holcomb stuck the threaded needle into his shirt front. "Suppose I should have told you, McLain, when you came to town and asked for the marshal job." He cleared his throat. "I've lived here ten years. In that time we've had half a dozen town marshals. Strutters. Gun-slingers. Show-offs. A poor run, looks as if."

"All six? That's—"

"I know. There have been good town marshals. From Abilene to Tombstone. They have done top-hand work in taming the frontier. They and the U. S. marshals. And a few sheriffs. But ours—a couple of them would run in mischievous kids and let whooping cowboys go. Afraid to tackle grown men. Others were windy blow-hards. Or too handy with their guns when they didn't need to be. No judgment.

"One got himself smoked down from plain blamed dumbheadedness. The last one, year ago, shot an inoffensive citizen. Came out he had killed a couple others back in Kansas. It's all turned the town completely sour. Then you happen along, just another hired gun, the way the people see it. Not a hired man, with judgment and principles perhaps, but a hired gun."

"Then if I put the pinch on this DeLocke, I, and you, won't have the backing of the public."

"I don't know. A few citizens are as out of patience as I am with Harry DeLocke's highhandedness, and the saloon and ranch rowdies, and indiscriminate killings and, to make it plain, hired guns too. The justice of the peace has given me his word he'll issue another warrant and put it in your hands. Quasi-legal, no doubt, but—he thinks public opinion will back us up if you handle the situation smoothly. That is"—Holcomb cleared his throat again—"unless you would rather resign and leave town."

"That's not my way, Mayor."

"Then you have a chore on your hands."

McLain got up and put on his hat.

"DeLocke is mean and tricky," Holcomb warned. "He may be sided by Sheriff Layhee."

"Layhee's not a sheriff," said McLain. "He's a process server. You say the warrant will be at the J. P's?"

"Yes—just a minute. There's another little item. Up at the free camp yard are a man and a girl, father and daughter. Movers. Border traipsers. The sheriff has ordered them not to let this day's sun set on them in this town."

"That kind?"

"They happened to stop at Jones' ranch last night. They saw the shooting. DeLocke doesn't want them here. Better see them before you get the warrant. Find out exactly what happened. Be sure of your ground." He added, "It's all in your hands."

McLain nodded and went out.

ON the sidewalk he paused to scan along the street, get his bearings. A Saturday crowd was in, with saddle horses and teams at the tie-racks. A man and a woman passed with a chilly glance at him. Another man gave him a blaring, curiosity-laden stare but did not speak, nor even nod.

Foss McLain lifted his attention away from people, sent his gaze along the street. It was an east-west street. He liked east-west streets. They were natural thoroughfares from the old to the new, from used country to fresh country. They had protection from cold north winds. Some day the vacant lots along this street would be built up; it would be a thriving town. It had good country roundabout. That was one reason why he had come here—he had heard of it as a town with a future.

He had hoped to make friends, to find a way of life and settle down, to get away from being a homeless frontier "tramp," as he had been called, and take roots. And from first sight he had felt a physical kinship with the location, if not the people—the gray-blue mountain range far to the west with its mystery of distance, the cozy hills just to the north and east. If only the people— But he mustn't feel resentment. These people were like people everywhere else, good people when you got to know them and they got to know you.

What was it the mayor had said? "It's all in your hands." Well, wasn't it always in a man's own hands?

He turned along the street eastward. Three blocks and he was passing his house. He had bought it on his second day here. Just a two-room, raw adobe place, but well built, with a water faucet in the yard and a shed for a horse or a cow. His heart seemed to swell in his breast. It was the first home he had ever owned. He would hate to lose it, have to sell it.

Then thoughts of his house were replaced by something more imminent. Harry DeLocke was coming out of his house a short distance away. Handsome Harry, as McLain had heard him called, with distaste in the speaker's tone. A tall, slim, lithe man who affected forty-dollar boots and sixty-dollar hats and had a roving eye for women and a curtness for underlings— McLain's familiarity with street humanity had already recorded these few points.

And with DeLocke were Sheriff Layhee and another man who, the marshal saw in a moment, was the real estate and insurance man of the town, by name, Blesset.

As the three reached the sidewalk they saw McLain and stopped, waiting, as if expecting something from him. McLain braced himself inwardly for whatever might be in the woodpile, and kept steadily on.

"Evening, men," McLain said as he approached, and he took the edge of the walk as if to pass them.

"Just a minute, Marshal," said DeLocke, in his curt way, that had a kind of cutting and mocking lightness about it. "You'll walk your legs off, going at that rate."

McLain stopped, but said nothing. The sheriff stood slightly back of DeLocke, as he always did when they were together; and as usual he smiled his rubbery little smile. Both he and DeLocke were armed.

"Listen." It was DeLocke. "Is his honor the mayor up to something? There's a little breeze rattling around, you know."

"Maybe," replied McLain in his deliberate manner, "you'd better ask him, Mr. DeLocke."

"Maybe," DeLocke said, in mincing imitation of McLain's words, "you could do a little errand back to him and remind him, if he's setting a hen, that you have no authority to serve warrants in county matters. What's your opinion, uh—McLain?"

McLain flashed a quick grin. "Guess I'll refer you to my lawyer, DeLocke."

"Well"—DeLocke and his shadow, the sheriff, moved to go on—"if you want to see me, McLain, I'll be som'ers about town."

"If and when," said McLain, "I'll find you."

They nodded and parted. Blesset, the smugly dressed realty man, had not spoken but there had been an odd look on his well-cared-for face as he turned away.

A little farther along the street, and across, a woman came out of a house. McLain had met her on the street half a dozen times. He knew her only as Madge Berry. To the town she was "that woman." DeLocke spent considerable time at her house. She nodded now and smiled slightly. She was almost the only person in town who gave him courteous greeting, a grave, friendly greeting. She was never over-dressed. McLain had begun to place her as a woman of sound character, regardless of what her relationship was with DeLocke. A good woman, he thought. An observant woman. And it came to him that she greeted him out of a kinship, a sense of his loneness, and her loneness.

A phrase from Mayor Holcomb came back to McLain, "public opinion." If and when he faced DeLocke to make an arrest, this woman, whether saint or sinner, would be a count against DeLocke in public opinion.

It would be an irony of fate if this happened. But he promptly put any feeling of sympathy for Madge Berry from him and projected his thoughts ahead to the task at the town's free camp yard.

A rickety covered wagon stood there, with two scrawny bay horses tethered to the wheels, munching at wisps of wind-scattered hay. A middle-aged, hopeless-looking man watched his approach. A young woman with a red bandanna bound around black hair, rose from tending a ground fire when the man said something to her from the side of his mouth.

McLain knew the type. Roamers of the frontier, looking for a suitable place to settle, and never finding it. Border tramps, he called them, without aspersion. A sorry lot, to be pitied.

"It ain't near sundown yet," the man spoke up, his eyes focusing on the town marshal's shield pinned on McLain's vest.

"Sundown or no sundown," spoke up the girl, "we're not leaving. The law can't make us go."

"Now-now, Viny," the man protested.

"I'm not budging," the girl declared firmly. "I've traipsed my last traipse up and down this Border."

"But that sheriff—we've got no money to get in trouble with."

"I'm not exactly interested in that sundown business," McLain cut in.

"You mean you're not here to put the shove on us?" the girl asked.

"That's right."

"Well! What are you, a visitor? Do come up and sit on the veranda!" She had an air. She made a dainty gesture toward the wagon with its wind-whipped tatters. "Or would you prefer to sit in the parlor out of the wind?"

"Viny!" the man protested again.

McLain laughed. He liked spunk and this gal seemed to have it. She was sure not the poor mover type, which was either cowed in silence or as sharp-tongued as an ax. But she had manners, and a nice voice, even if it was sarcastic now.

"What I'd like to have," said McLain, "is a little conflab about what happened this morning, out where that man was shot."

AND that's a horse of another feather, he told himself as he saw them brace and tighten up like any unwilling witnesses. Then the man relaxed visibly, and thumbed off across to a tract of land that lay between the town and a creek that had a little flowing water. The land had been leveled and partly furrowed for irrigation.

"Mr. Law, you-all are the exact man I've been wanting to see. I expect you know ever'body and ever'thing about this town. While ago I leisured out over yonder land, and the crick. It's the place I been wanting for ten years. Pile up a little dam in that crick and ditch the water over to them two acres, and you got the garden of Eden, no less. Vegetables f'r the town and some to put up f'r wintah. You know who owns it?"

"I'm a newcomer too," said McLain. "Now about that shooting—"

"We haven't any money to buy land," said the girl, sweet as pie, "but it's nice to dream. Don't you think so, Mister—uh—our name is Harwood."

"Mine is Foss—Foster McLain. Now about—"

"A boy, while ago," said Pa Harwood, "say mebbe the man in that rusty tin shack owns the land."

"Did you folks see that shooting?"

"Yes we did," said the girl. "We've told it three times already. Have we got to talk about it all the rest of our lives?"

"Once more would satisfy me, Miss Vina Harwood."

"Ssst!" Mr. Harwood warned, and jerked his head to indicate four men coming on foot from the back side of the camp lot. "Them's on the same floating chip. They're mad enough to shoot our ears off."

The four had apparently left their horses at a hitch-rack. They were coming abreast with a grim truculence in their steps. Shabby men, lean and hard from work. Cowmen-cowboy type. When they saw Harwood and the girl and McLain with his marshal's shield they stopped, and one said, scarcely moving his lips:

"This is them." And to Harwood and the girl: "You folks see that killin' this morning, out in the country?"

Harwood nodded. "We just kinda happen to be there. We didn't have anything to do with it."

"We know that. We want to know exactly what happened." His wintry glance bounced to McLain. "Whatta you got to do with this? Tryin' to get shet of witnesses?"

"My name is Foss McLain. I'm the new town marshal. And you men?"

"I'm Fil Gipson, but it don't mean nothin'. We've been dispossessed, foreclosed on, like Bolton Jones. Only we ain't been shot down like he was, yet."

"Dispossessed by the bank," spoke up another of the four, and spat. "Wouldn't let us have any more money to op'rate on, 'can't extend yore credit any longer,' they sez. Another year would of seen us on our feet."

"Land grabbing," said a third. "Caught us with our suspenders busted, and they'll ketch more right away. 'Handsome Harry' DeLocke, that murdered Bolton, that's the mink in the henhouse."

"I didn't know he runs the bank," said McLain.

"He runs it all right. He ain't the president nur the cashier. But he's the biggest stockholder and he's on the—what they call the board. He gives the orders. What's it tuh you—what you say your name was—McLain?"

"Tain't nothing to him," spoke up the first man, Gipson. "Snoopin', likely. What we want to know"—he whipped out hard at the man and the girl—"what was said and done out there? What reason did DeLocke have to shoot Jones down?"

Harwood, plainly uncomfortable, cleared his throat.

"Yessir. We camped nigh Mr. Jones' house, me and my dotter. 'Bout sunup we taken pails and go f'r water, and up rides three men on horses. Mr. Jones runs back inta the house and come out with a rifle a-lying in his elbow.

"'What you men doin' on my land?' he says.

"'It isn't your land any more,' says the purty man called Besset—"

"Blesset, Pa," Vina Harwood correct-

ed, and then by way of explanation to the men: "The real estate agent."

" 'I bid the land in day before yesterday at the sheriff's sale,' says Blesset. 'I'm here to take possession.'

" 'You don't git possession,' says Mr. Jones. 'I've got some grace, three days.'

" 'This is the third day,' says Blesset. 'I expect you to vacate.'

" 'I ain't goin' to vacate till I can find me a place to put my goods,' says Mr. Jones.

"Mr. DeLocke—I don't know his name then—puts out his hand and touches the man with the sheriff's badge pinned on the outside of his coat as big as a new moon, and the sheriff kinda busts out at Mr. Jones like a paper sack blowed up and plopping mushy:

" 'You defying the law, Jones?'

" 'Not the law, land thieves,' says Jones. 'I'm a-claimin' my rights. I got three days o' grace from being notified—'

" 'You've been notified,' the sheriff chirps. 'You get off today. Hear me?'

" 'No!' Mr. Jones yells. 'I'll stay till the devil's pond freezes over if I'm a mind to. You men git!'

" 'Sheriff Layhee,' says DeLocke, 'you going to take all that slack off of him?'

"The sheriff's hand kinda slides towards his gun, which at the same time he kinda turns pale. Click goes Mr. Jones' rifle. I look at him quick. So does Viny. But he ain't got the gun leveled on the party. The barrel is yetsome cradled in his elbow. All he has done is thumb back the hammer. His thumb is still on the hammer. His finger is hookin' at the trigger.

" 'You men hightail it off o' my land,' he says, and he is crazy mad and watching the sheriff's hands."

"No, Pa," Vina spoke up. "He said, 'You men make tracks out of my gate.' If we've got to be witnesses we don't want to deepen our trouble by saying wrong words."

"All right, 'You men make tracks out of my gate', he says. 'You got no right to order me off yet,' he says. And, 'I don't want to kill nobody.'

"Well, there he is. Mad as a hornet. And it looks like he is on the eve of throwing the rifle around on 'em. All them three on their horses has got to do is back off and go. And the sheriff makes a little move to do so—he tugs at his reins and his horse scrapes a foot back. But quick as a trout striking for a grasshopper DeLocke strikes for his gun. His revolver. It barks twice quicker'n I can bat my eyes. Mr. Jones grunts and falls down and dies."

IN the silence, emphasized by the popping of rags and tags of the Harwood wagon-cover in the wind, the man Fil Gipson spoke up:

"Did Bolton Jones fire a shot?"

"Nary a one."

"Did he ever level his gun on them?"

"No."

"Did the sheriff tell DeLocke to shoot."

"No, he sure didn't."

"Did DeLocke have on a deputy's badge, or speak of any authority?"

"Nossir."

Gipson turned to the other men, sternly. They did not speak. They did not have to; their looks said enough. One of them wore a belt-gun. Two had revolvers stuck in their pants belts. The fourth had a bulging hip-pocket. Gipson put one more hard question to Harwood and the girl:

"You folks been ordered out of town?"

"Before the sun sets, yessir."

"Don't go."

The men turned, then, as one, toward town. "Just a minute," said McLain. "Don't go in town and start trouble."

Their movements stopped as of one man, and they faced him, their eyes bitter and defiant.

"You're just a hired gun, ain't yuh?"

"I know how you feel, men." McLain spoke quietly, without the slightest touch of bluster. "But don't start anything with DeLocke. The law will handle him."

"Heh-heh." Fil Gipson laughed contemptuously, without mirth. "What law? That sheriff's? It's self-defense with us, Mister—we've been robbed of our ranches. Little two-bit ranches out in the Two-Bit ranch country. But

we've got families. And theh's more of us will be robbed soon. This is no time for law that ain't no law. A hired gun would be settin' easier to keep his tin bill outa this."

They strode off then, their old worn bootheels tapping the hard street where the wind had blown it bare of dust. When they were out of hearing McLain turned to the man and girl.

"You folks forget the sheriff's orders about leaving. You'll be protected. Your testimony is going to be needed."

"By gunny!" exclaimed Harwood, all eyes for a man going toward a rusty-tin shack at one corner, of the two-acre irrigable tract. "There's the feller that owns this vegetable farm."

And off went Harwood in long plowman's strides, pursuing a dream.

McLain looked at the girl. Their eyes met and held. His gray eyes. Her dark blue eyes that chimed with her black hair. Deep eyes. Steady eyes. Something in her face, he thought, as sensible and gentle and as fine as was in the face of that woman, Madge Berry. Then, suddenly embarrassed, Vina Harwood dropped her gaze and turned toward the wagon.

"Want to see something?" she asked.

She untied a string and drew aside the loose corner of the wagon's cover. And there, in a low wooden box, was a gray cat with three tiny kittens. The mother cat's eyes flamed green with warning and defiance. McLain chuckled, and put out his hand and stroked the mother. Surprisingly, she subsided instantly, and stretched on her side and accepted his petting. In a moment she was purring.

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" exclaimed Vina Harwood. "You're the first person except me that's ever got away with that. You"—her voice turned to a whisper—"you have the gentle touch."

HER clean shapely hand was on the ends of the wagon's floor-boards. McLain did a bold thing. A thing he had never done before in all his twenty-eight years. An impulsive thing, and he was not an impulsive man. He laid his hand on hers. Gently. And his eyes turned to hers. For an instant they held in deep appraisal. Then a great startle entered her eyes and she jerked her hand away. Shocked, embarrassed, McLain turned away without a word and struck out for the deeper town, blaming himself for an unwarranted liberty.

His thoughts, though, could not long hold to the mistake, even if his hand did still feel the shape of her hand. Trouble was ahead in town. There'd be a killing, or killings, as certainly as the four two-bit, dispossessed ranchmen met DeLocke. Only obtaining that warrant and arresting DeLocke could stop it. And maybe even that would not.

A good many people were in town, in sight, as the street came into nearer view. No, not people, he saw with an inward start. Teams and horses at the hitchpoles, he saw, but not people. The walks were almost empty of people.

Then as he approached the house of Madge Berry he saw the reason. The two-bit ranchmen had stopped before the house, two at the near corner, two a little farther along at the next corner of the yard. McLain crossed over.

"Is DeLocke in that house?" he asked of the first two, and one of them was Fil Gipson.

"We're waitin' to find out," said Gipson.

"He stays there a lot, we hear," said the other man. "You trot along, fella."

"Join the other two there," the marshal ordered. "Get away from here."

"Sez you!"

"If you start a fight here horses, people, may be killed by wild lead. Move on. You've got the town scared into the stores now."

"So the hired gun," Gipson opined, "is throwing in with the thieves."

The two from the opposite corner came up hastily. Gipson warned them:

"Quit your watch here or I'll jug all of you. I mean to have no shooting up and down this street."

They stood defiantly, weathered eyes beating at him. But with his stocky body that never gave an inch, hands at his sides without the slightest nervousness, with his steady gaze, he stared them

down. Their feet shifted, and began to turn away. He kept behind them for half a block, and when he saw that their defiance was broken, for the moment at least, he spoke again.

"Listen, men." They faced back to him. "I'm not trying to be tough. But I am the law, right here and now. I told you the law would handle DeLocke. I meant it. I'm going now for a warrant to arrest him."

They bored at him, their expressions changing.

"Well, now," said Gipson, "that's a bird with different hair."

McLain nodded them on. He crossed the street. One of them called after him.

"We'll be watching you, gun." It wasn't friendliness.

At the corner he turned left. The six-room frame structure that was the courthouse was on a side street. Beside it was the little shack home and office of the justice of the peace. Old Struther was in, sowing cigar ash on his vest as usual. He spoke not a word but with a long brownish finger he slid a folded paper to the corner of his table. McLain took it up, saw that it was a warrant directing "any sheriff, constable or other peace officer" in the state to arrest H. DeLocke, and went out with no word spoken between them.

McLain took a cue from the four dispossessed ranchmen. From their actions he believed DeLocke must be in Madge Berry's house. Keeping to the back street so as not to attract an audience he hurried in that direction. This brought him presently to the rear of his own house. A tenseness was on him, in mind and muscles. It had happened before in slow arrests like this one. He didn't like it. It made for a slow gun. But any little diversion would break it up. Even a drink of water, or the act of getting it.

He passed along the side of the house, to enter at the front door. And when he reached the front, there was Vina Harwood, still with the red bandanna binding her hair, stepping along the sidewalk. Her gaze was high and keen, watching along the street, intent as a hunter stalking prey.

"Hi," he said.

She started violently, came back to earth, saw him. "Oh!" Her hand started to her mouth.

"Looking for somebody?" he asked.

"No! That is—well. You see, I can tell there's trouble in the wind. I just wanted to tell you—you needn't get into it on our account. We can hitch up the team and pull out."

"The grand jury meets Monday. You'll be needed, you and your father. They'll likely hold the murder trial next week."

"We'll have to find a place to stay."

"This is my house," he said.

"Yours!"

"Would you like to see inside?"

He turned toward the door. She stepped down from the walk doubtfully. Gave a glance around to see who might be interested in the conventions. He opened the door, entered, held it for her. She stepped in, gingerly, then:

"Two rooms. Oh, how neat! Swept and orderly!"

"Guess I'm a crank."

"But with curtains at the window! And a red flower in a pot, right there!"

"Maybe you can find one."

THAT didn't register, because of her interested looking. He found a glass and said something about a drink. "I'm thirstier than chips." They stepped out, and she saw the pipe and faucet.

"Oh," she said, bending over it, "water right in the yard! How handy that will be for us!"

"Yes," he said.

Then she realized what she had said. Her hand slapped over her mouth. Horror flashed in her eyes. She squeaked in dismay. She gathered her skirts and ran. And she did not stop when she hit the sidewalk.

McLain moved to the walk and smiled after her. For some fool reason he was as pleased as punch.

Then he saw DeLocke. He was along the street in a direction opposite from Madge Berry's. So he hadn't been at her house after all. Sheriff Layhee and Blesset were with him. McLain still had the glass in his hand. He forgot about

a drink. He tossed the glass back toward his door. At that instant DeLocke and the other two turned into Blesset's real estate and insurance office.

Across the street and down a little way the four rocky-faced ranchmen were grouped and watching. McLain did not want them mixing into any ruckus that might develop. He did not take the walk but went along the back of the buildings, mostly out of public sight.

Should he arrest DeLocke in Blesset's office? DeLocke might resist, with his gun. The sheriff might side him. An ugly mess could result.

Words of Mayor Holcomb came back to McLain—public opinion. Suddenly McLain knew that he wanted people to see what took place. Witnesses. The more the better.

HE reached the rear of Blesset's office. Saw through the window the three men in dark silhouette against the larger front, street-side window, where the late afternoon sun was streaming in.

DeLocke was at a desk, writing. He got up. Handed Blesset a slip of paper, that could be a bank check. Blesset accepted it, and passed a sheaf of papers into DeLocke's hands. They smiled and nodded; and DeLocke and Layhee stepped out at once, DeLocke slipping the papers into his inside coat pocket.

McLain went around the building to the front. DeLocke and the sheriff were forty feet away, going toward the thicker part of town. That suited McLain. He followed. People all along had stepped out of the stores, sort of gingerly, just barely outside the doors, ready to dart back in. There were too many still in town for this late in the day. No doubt word had got around that something was to happen. Word about such things always got around, McLain knew from long experience.

McLain stepped upon the porch of the town's hotel. It was part of the sidewalk. His developing plan was to call to DeLocke when they got where the people were thickest. But now he saw the hotel's triangle at his elbow, used to beat upon and summon guests to meals. Instantly he saw the way to do all this. He seized the iron rod hanging there and began a loud and furious beating of the triangle.

All in a moment people were hurrying, running, toward the noise. He saw the four horsemen from the Two-Bit ranch country come with clumping boots. He saw DeLocke and the sheriff stop and look back, then come on.

The scheme was working out! The street was filling. There would be an audience. And public opinion, for one side or the other.

But there must be no killing, with his hired gun!

McLain stopped the beating of his tom-tom. Faces were out there in the street looking up at him. A sea of faces, suddenly, it seemed. And DeLocke and Sheriff Layhee were coming on to the hotel porch. A silence fell with a jolt, and out of it DeLocke spoke, in his usual airy, mocking manner.

"Where's the fire, stranger?"

McLain waited one moment longer until the fringe of the crowd was tucked in a little tighter, so that all could hear. Then:

"DeLocke, I am arresting you for the murder of Bolton Jones, this morning."

"Yes? You're a little off the track, hired gun. Jurisdiction, you know."

"I have a warrant here"—McLain plucked the paper from his shirt pocket—"made to any peace officer in the state. But," he added carefully, quietly, "I want to be fair. If the sheriff will make the arrest I will step aside."

"Not going to be any arrest," said DeLocke. "I shot in self-defense."

"That is for a jury to decide," said McLain. "Sheriff, will you make the arrest?"

"Why—why—" stammered Layhee, just back and to one side of his boss, and the rubbery smile faded and became a weak scar. "I—"

Somebody down off the porch grunted in contempt.

"Will you go to jail quietly, DeLocke?" McLain asked.

"I'm not going quiet or any other way!" DeLocke slammed.

"DeLocke, I'll take your gun."

"You'll not take my gun!" DeLocke's hand slapped to his revolver.

OUT in the crowd McLain heard a gasp, and it sounded, he thought, like Vina Harwood.

DeLocke's position lifted his coat slightly away, and McLain saw the sheaf of papers that DeLocke had put there, in the inside pocket. McLain's thoughts leaped. Deeds! If they were—if they weren't—this could work two ways, he thought, and break him or help him. And help a lot of little, hard-up ranchmen. He was close to DeLocke. Instead of reaching for his own gun, or DeLocke's, his hand darted to the papers and snatched them out.

"Blast you!" DeLocke bellowed, and rushed, grabbing for the sheaf.

McLain set his hand against DeLocke's breast and with all the power of his stocky body he slammed the forty-dollar boots and the sixty-dollar hat back against the hotel wall like a mule kicking a pig into a fence.

On the rebound DeLocke's gun came out, like a trout striking bait, as Mr. Harwood had said. And DeLocke's face was like an explosion.

"Better not," said McLain, softly, and he wasn't eying DeLocke to charm a wild beast; he was looking at the folded papers, shuffling through them.

DeLocke was baffled. He looked around, knowing that if he shot the marshal it would be rank, raw murder. He let out a yelp:

"Hands! Hands!" Calling for the gunnies that he had on some of his ranches.

Two rocky-faced hombres sprang up to the porch. And like their shadows, three more sprang up, with faces just as rocky, and they were Fil Gipson and two of his fellow dispossesseds, with guns in their hands.

"Layhee!" DeLocke snarled. "Are you standing for this?"

Layhee looked sick. He made to draw his six-gun. And did draw it, with all the force and energy of wet tissue paper. Fil Gipson promptly slapped it out of his hand.

"We need," said Gipson, whangy as a frosty morning, "a sheriff in this county."

McLain finished shuffling through the papers. He opened one, and his roving eye caught a name. He was satisfied. He handed four of the folded deeds to Gipson.

"Here's the titles to your ranches," he said. "The four of you. You can do what you please with 'em." Then the marshal faced the crowd. "Folks," he said, and he held up the paper he had retained, "this is a deed. It is made out to Harry DeLocke. I saw Mr. Blesset hand it to DeLocke, with those other four, and receive a check in payment. Didn't I, Mr. Blesset?"

The real estate man was three or four heads back in the crowd, both scared and defiant.

"I don't know what you saw!"

"You bid in five ranches at a sheriff's sale a few days ago?"

"Well?"

"And transferred them today to DeLocke, with payment received?"

"That's my business."

"I think your answer is sufficient. Folks," McLain slapped the paper across his palm, "this is a deed from Blesset to DeLocke for the little Bolton Jones ranch, and DeLocke shot and killed Bolton Jones this morning."

A gasp went up from the crowd, and grunts, and hard words, and a rising hum like that of mobs McLain had heard in his time. McLain faced around to DeLocke. The ranchman and bankstock owner, the forecloser by proxy, showed a pale, but wrathful face.

"Ready to go to jail, DeLocke?"

DeLocke snarled and swooped for the sheriff's gun that still lay on the boards where Fil Gipson had slapped it. McLain swooped too. They came rearing up together. And DeLocke had the gun. McLain's upward levering knee struck it. Knocked it high. McLain's fist struck it higher. It fired, through the roof of the porch.

Then McLain and DeLocke were in a tussle, a twisting, lunging, rushing-back-and-forth set-to that bumped into

the hotel wall, and into men and sent them dodging and sprawling. Once, in the lightning flash of an eye, McLain saw Gipson, gun in fist, dancing about like a referee. Then McLain and DeLocke rolled off the porch into the feet of the milling crowd, and into the choking, blinding, stirred-up dust.

When McLain disentangled himself, and revealed DeLocke, DeLocke magically was wearing handcuffs, bright rings of jewelry shining in the setting sun, and glinting merrily for all eyes to see.

The chief discussion in the pool-hall and the two saloons that night, so McLain heard later, was how on earth the marshal had got the things on DeLocke in all that squabble.

McLain never gave any explanation.

Now, he stooped and hauled DeLocke to his feet. DeLocke held out his hands and looked at the manacles, and his mouth twisted derisively.

McLain, scanning the crowd, on guard against any rescue, or attack on himself, saw, half a dozen people away, the grave face of Madge Berry, saw her turn away with a strange blending of hurt, and satisfaction, and finality, in her eyes and on her firm lips.

Then hands were reaching out to McLain in congratulation, including Mayor Holcomb's. People all around were looking at him, and not many were frowning or mad.

When the jail door clicked on DeLocke, McLain avoided the crowd by taking a roundabout way to his house. It was supper time. He was hungry. Sometimes he ate his evening meal at the restaurant, on the theory that a man should get one full meal a day, at least. But tonight he preferred the privacy of his own kitchen, away from the talk and gabble that he might be subjected to elsewhere. He never liked to talk about what he had done, nor be thanked.

As before, he approached his house from the rear, and as before, when he came to the front, he found Vina Harwood out in front.

"Oh!" she said. "I'm—I'm not just hanging around. Honest I'm not. I—I—just wanted to—to tell you—oh, you were fine! Making that speech! Getting the irons on Mr. DeLocke. I tried to see how you did it! They're talking about making you sheriff. Did—will—"

"Will you come in out of the cold?" Marshal McLain made a polite gesture toward his door.

"No!"

"Will you—tomorrow?" His voice was gentle, husky.

The animation left her face. It became grave, and deep, like Madge Berry's. And her eyes penetrated to the depths of his soul.

"Do you—mean—"

"Yes."

An interruption came.

Mr. Harwood came galloping up, with a man in tow.

"Oh, here you are, Viny! Listen, we can't leave town. Got to stay put now. I've traded the team and wagon for that irrigated patch! All we got to do, me and Mr. Simpson, here, is to make and sign the deed. Come on, Mr. Simpson, we got to find the J.P. er somebody."

"Oh where, oh where," Vina wailed, "will I put my trunk out of the wagon? And the cat and the kittens?"

"In our house," said Foss McLain, thumbing.

"Eh?" questioned Mr. Harwood, looking at the two of them, startled.

"Tomorrow, Mr. Harwood," said McLain, politely but boldly, "you're going to have a son-in-law."

"Oh, I thought you meant you were already hitched. Kinda sudden. Come on, Mr. Simpson, 'fore it gets dark."

The man Simpson seemed quite as eager. They went galloping off together.

Vina Harwood was all at once as shy as a little bird. But she came up to McLain, her lip tremulous.

"Th-thank—you," she whispered. "It will be first home I ever had."

"Th-thank *you*," said Marshal McLain.

Range Detective Steve Reese at His Best in VALLEY OF THE HUNTED, by Donald Bayne Hobart, in the March RANGE RIDERS WESTERN — Only 15c Everywhere!

by **DUPREE POE**

The Willow Creek beavers teach Hiram Wells a valuable lesson!

Hiram's gnarled fist smashed the words back into Greer's mouth

HOMESTEAD RIGHTS

HIRAM WELLS saw the first two homeseekers the day they arrived on Willow Creek. They were two old rodents, weighing more than fifty pounds each. Their tails were flat like paddles, their hind feet strongly webbed for swimming. Those two old beavers were the advance guard of four younger ones that came a little later. In a way, those furred engineers of the wilds reminded Hiram Wells of himself, for they were sturdy pioneers, grimly determined to file homestead rights on land claimed by cantankerous old Bob Greer, the cattle baron, who owned the big Cross-Arrow spread.

"Some trapper has dynamited them out of their lodge, wherever they come

from," Hiram surmised. "Otherwise, them beaver wouldn't be migrating before the ice breaks and the snow is melted."

Those six wild creatures were the survivors of a massacre, he reckoned. They were like a family of nesters, driven from pillar to post by indignant cowmen who claimed the whole range for their own. But those little animals down there in the willows acted as though they had come to stay—regardless. The thought brought a hard glint to Hiram's blue eyes shaded under the brim of a battered black hat. Life was a battle from start to end, it looked like.

A gaunt, lean man in patched blue shirt and faded overalls, he stood near the soddy he had built for his family the fall before, and his glance speared beyond Willow Creek, to settle on three riders who came jogging over the slushy snow toward his place. He forgot about the beavers.

There was no fear in his blue eyes when those grim-faced men rode into the yard, their silence more threatening than words might have been. They took in the soddy, then the covered wagon that contained all of Hiram Wells' household belongings, ready to roll. On the wagon seat, they saw Mary Wells, as old and weathered as Hiram himself. She clutched the driving lines tightly, as though fearing that gaunt, starved team of big-footed plow horses might bolt with the wagon. Her cheeks were bloodless and her eyes wild with fear under a bonnet that covered her head and made a frame for her care-worn face. Two rabbit-faced children, a girl and a boy, peered cautiously up from the wagon bed, where the mother had placed them for greater safety.

"Eddie, you and Sis git back down there!" she ordered in a high-pitched voice. "Your paw's got a-plenty trouble on his hands, without worryin' over you!" Then, she picked up a muzzle-loading shotgun and waited, trembling. "If airy harm comes to you, Paw, I'll shorely hurt som'buddy," she declared.

The cattlemen sat there in saddles, hands on gunbutts. Nobody said a word. They looked hard at the woman, and their eyes chilled slightly.

BIG BOB GREER swung down from saddle, methodically deliberate, in the manner of a man accustomed to forcing his will on other people. No anger flamed his round-jowled face. His lips set tight and his eyes were steady. Without a word, he turned to a saddle pocket and took out a small parcel. Calmly, he struck a match, touched flame to a two-inch fuse that protruded from one end of that oblong thing in his hand.

"Dynamite!" Mary gasped from the wagon. "Look out, Paw—he aims to blow us up!"

Hiram Wells' clawlike right hand stabbed for holster. It froze there when those two hard-eyed riders dipped hands for guns, came up with .45's covering him. Mary aimed the shotgun, covering those men.

"I'd ought to kill you, Wells," rumbled old Bob Greer. "On account of I gave you a-plenty time to git out of here. But I aim to be more than fair with you, on account of your family."

Before Hiram could catch his breath, the big cattleman flung that bundle of sputtering dynamite toward the soddy. His aim was straight and sure. Right through the door went that dangerous stuff. Hiram's horrified glance froze on the domelike roof of that underground dwelling he had built for his folks. Inside the place, all heck cut loose with a rumble that shook the ground. The dome of the soddy lifted skyward, exploding into a million bits of torn willows, sod and earth.

When the debris settled, there was nothing left but a smoking hole in the ground, from which an acrid odor rose, tingling through the February air to sting the nester's nostrils. That hole was blasted black, like the hatred that rose in Hiram Wells. He clenched his knobby fists and wished he had an even break with those grim-faced cowmen.

"There wasn't no need for you to do that," he said slowly. "It's jest a mean way of scaring my folks and makin' me mighty mad."

Big Bob Greer unbuckled his gunbelt and hung it on his saddle. He turned to face the nester. "You ain't gone, like I told you to," he rumbled. "Now, danged your polecat hide, I aim to show you I meant business. Tell that woman of your'n to put up that shotgun! I aim to fight you fair and square."

Without waiting for Hiram to speak to Mary, the big man moved toward him, huge fists balled. His two riders remained in saddles, hard-eyed and

watchful, cigarettes dangling from their thin lips. They apparently had their orders not to interfere, unless somebody started a smoke-rolling.

Hiram Wells felt the surge of a great relief. He unbuckled his gunbelt, let it drop to the ground. Mary lowered the shotgun, encouraged her man.

"Beat all the dickens out of him, Paw —whup him to a frazzle!" she cried.

"This'll teach you I meant for you to be gone last night!" bellowed Bob Greer, swinging a balled fist at Hiram's head. "I aim to beat you plumb to death!"

Hiram ducked that blow, lashed out with a right that neatly clipped bark from the big man's left cheek, bringing the blood.

"I couldn't git out last night," he panted in protest. "Sis was sick, and Maw had her old misery so bad we couldn't travel, nohow!"

A bellow of rage came from the cattleman. He smeared blood on his cheek with the back of a hand. Then, he tried to grab Hiram around the middle. The nester butted with his head and lashed out with fists at the big man's mid-section, those blows hurting. Greer stumbled back a pace, grunting. Hiram kicked him on the right shin with a thick-soled boot, almost knocking the leg from under him. Greer howled with pain.

"Why, dang your nester heart, I'll—"

Hiram's gnarled fist smashed those words back into Greer's mouth. That fist was bone-hard and solid. Greer went back on his heels, amazed.

THE nester plowed in, swinging furiously, figuring he would end the fight quickly. He slipped from the cowman's embrace, but Greer caught him again, pinning Hiram's arms to his sides. All the breath left Hiram when his ribs collapsed in that mighty hug. Blood pounded at his temples. All the strength oozed out of him.

Near the wagon, a girl screamed. "Paw! He's killing Paw!"

The two punchers stiffened. Then, from eyes that fairly popped from his head, Hiram saw Sis sprawled on the ground near the wagon. Mary had dropped her shotgun. She was bending over the prostrate girl.

Suddenly, the big cattleman turned loose all holds, releasing Hiram. Concern filled his eyes when he stood over the girl.

"She's a-dying!" he gasped. "Cain't nobody do nothin' for that girl!"

Sis's frail body jerked convulsively. She trembled in every fibre. Her eyes rolled back in her head. Hiram grabbed her arms and legs, held them tightly. He had helped Sis through a lot of such trouble lately. It seemed she was getting worse all the time. Epileptic, the doctors called it. Caused maybe from a blood clot on the brain, he'd been told. Might be caused, he reasoned, because she didn't ever get enough good grub. Didn't have a chance, the way a man had to drag his folks all over creation trying to settle down some place in the cattle country. Bitterness seethed through Hiram.

The girl stopped struggling, went limp all over. At last, she opened her blue eyes and recognition dawned slowly in them. She clutched her dad's hand when she saw the cattlemen.

"Paw, I'm scared they aim to kill you!" she gasped. "Oh, Paw!"

Hiram Wells stood up to face Bob Greer. "You folks had best go now," he said slowly, hard menace in his tone. "You're a-scaring Sis."

He locked glances with old Bob Greer. Concern for the girl mingled with frost in the cattleman's hard eyes. "You and me are apt to have another session," said Greer softly, "if you don't vacate, pronto. Right now, I reckon you'd best git that team goin' and take that gal to a doctor." For a moment, he studied the nester. "You got any money at all?"

Hiram Wells shook his head. "Not for no doctor, I ain't." His lips tightened. He walked over to where he had dropped his gunbelt in the snow. Calmly, he buckled it around him, dropped hand to the gun's walnut butt. "Sis ain't in shape to travel," he said softly. "Her maw is ailing, too. I don't aim to leave this place until my folks are better."

All the softness went out of Bob Greer's heavy face. Crimson rose up his bullish neck, spread into his cheeks. Maw picked up her shotgun, stood tense and ready. Those two Cross-Arrow punchers stiffened slightly, touched their holstered guns. Hiram knew it wouldn't take much to kick off a smoke-rolling on the spot. He steeled himself to resist.

"I don't aim to budge one inch today," he said flatly, "unless you and your gun-hung riders whip me and my folks plumb over the ridges."

His glance clashed with the big cattle-

man's for a moment. Then, Bob Greer cussed softly, glared hard at the nester.

"I don't aim to fight no sick gal," the cowman declared, fuming.

He swung into saddle, headed with his men down the trail toward the Cross-Arrow outfit beyond the creek. He looked over his shoulder.

"You'd better high-tail it out of here soon as possible," he declared.

When they were out of hearing, Hiram told his wife, "That danged old cowman is tougher than a rawhide boot, but he don't aim to kill us nesters—otherwise, he wouldn't have shucked his guns and fought with his fists. I'm a judge of men, honey. You see how he turned tail jest because of a pore, sick gal? He's mean all right, but he won't hurt women folks."

"Paw, I'm plumb scared 'most all the time in this cow country," Mary replied, sighing. "I sometimes wish we'd stayed back home in Kansas and rented our farm, givin' Seth Miller his half share on everything. It'd of been better for the younguns."

At times, it seemed the same way to Hiram. A man was a man where he came from, and there was nobody could chouse him off his place if he raised good crops, paid his rent and minded his own affairs. Out here in the cow country, a man had to fight all the time just to stay alive!

HE sighed wearily and looked at that black hole blasted in the ground. It would take a lot of work to rebuild that soddy for his folks. Anyhow, the cattlemen would ride over some day and blow it up again, he reckoned. He went down to the creek and rested his gaunt form on the end of a fallen birch tree, letting his gaze come to rest on the swirling water. The creek was not deep. It would probably go dry in the summer, or form into shallow pools, with most of the stream sinking into the sand, leaving only a small trickle on the surface. A man couldn't irrigate from that, not even a garden. Shucks, there wouldn't be enough water even for cattle during the dry spell.

Hiram reckoned the best thing to do might be to pack up and head for a more friendly range to stake his homestead. He didn't want trouble.

Then, he saw the beavers at work. Driven out of the warmth and comfort of their lodge somewhere by a trapper, those little creatures seemed undaunted by their misfortune. They were going about their building operations with the orderly understanding of human engineers. The man saw that they had chosen a sandbank in the creek upon which to build a new home. They were at work building the bar into a more symmetrically perfect oval, sealing the sand in place with water-logged sticks and mud that they carried on forefeet braced with their chins as they swam through the water.

Before noon, they had formed an island of the sand bar, and Hiram knew that island would be the foundation for their lodge. Later, he heard them at work along the creek banks, cutting down three-inch saplings with their sharp incisor teeth. They dropped the trees easily, always felling them toward the water. Then, next day some of those saplings had been cut into lengths and carried over to the sand bar. They were dropped there in a tangle, as though without thought or reason, but there was calculated reason to everything those beaver engineers did. They were methodical little creatures.

No cattlemen came to molest Hiram Wells and his family. He stood on guard against such an invasion day and night, sleeping restlessly at times in the wagon, while Mary kept watch for invaders. There was no need trying to rebuild his soddy, he reckoned, Bob Greer and his men would destroy it again. There wasn't much use in a pore nester doing anything, it looked like, because he wouldn't find much of a welcome on the next range he reached. He now sprawled on the creek bank, wishing he could put in just one good crop somewhere and have enough money for his family.

"I'd shore see Sis got a good doctor and enough grub," he mused. He looked at chips lying near a sapling stump. Those chips looked as though they'd been chopped out with a hatchet, but beaver teeth had fallen the tree. "Them dadblamed little devils remind me of a nester," he said. "Always bein' shoved around from piller to post by trappers who want to take their plews." He kind of envied them their determination and industry.

The beavers didn't give up easily. They struggled on to build that new lodge for their colony. Nothing daunted them. The work went on and the lodge

took form. The furry engineers tied the logs in place with finer branches from the trees they'd cut along the creek banks. They sealed the cracks with mud. Danged nigh like a nester building a soddy for his folks, Hiram reckoned, for the place took the form of a moundlike structure with an entrance at the bottom. There was much diving with the long cuttings that were anchored in the mud to hold them in place.

Then, the beavers became more actively engaged cutting timber along the creek banks. Downstream from the lodge, they began forming a dam across the creek. Day by day, they worked energetically, a labor that might have been done in summer time, except for a grave emergency. They met that emergency with untiring energy, and within three weeks the dam was finished. Now, Hiram saw why the dam was important, for the water began to rise behind it. Soon, there was a small lake formed, reaching for a mile upstream. The top of the lodge protruded above water, but the entrance was below the surface. That provided a safety measure against natural enemies during winter months when the colony of beavers remained under the ice or in the lodge.

Down there under the water, they would have food in plenty, aspen, birch and willow, to provide the bark that almost wholly constituted their daily diet. No natural enemy could harm them, but they would not be safe from trappers who carried dynamite. That thought worried the man.

Hiram compared the trappers with range-hog cattlemen who struck out at helpless nesters. The nesters had no defense against such men. Even killing a range hog wouldn't guarantee a settler his homestead rights, for the law might get him and stretch his scrawny neck with a brand-new rope.

THOSE beavers couldn't even strike back at trappers, but that didn't stop them from building their home. Slowly, Hiram Wells got up and went for his axe. He began cutting the willows he needed to repair that blasted soddy. Before nightfall, he had the roof completed, and the place looked like home to his family. Those beavers had taught him something about courage.

Mary shook her head doubtfully. "I seen a rider up on the ridge yesterday," she said, troubled. "He went on his way when he seen we'd done nothin' about fixin' up the soddy again. I reckon Bob Greer ain't been bothering us these past weeks on that account. He figures we're just camped here in the wagon temporary-like, and that we'll move on like he told us when Sis is better. Now, he'll see we're fixin' up to stay, Paw—and there'll be the dickens to pay for it!"

Hiram looked toward the creek, let his gaze freeze on the beaver lodge. He thought of what a trapper might do to those game little animals and what a cattleman could do to a nester. Sis lay in bed, moaning slightly. It seemed she got thinner by the day. She had to have a doctor mighty soon!

"I got to stop somewhere," Hiram drawled, "and make a crop."

He worried all that night, then early next morning went down to the creek to take a look at the beavers. In a way, those industrious little animals gave him faith and confidence that he needed. His eyes bulged when he saw that the lake was almost dry. The dam had broken. Then, from the shallow water, he saw an otter slinking. He knew that the otter had bored through the beaver dam, released the water in order to trap the fish that had found refuge in the lake. He wondered if the beavers would give up now.

"Now, there's a heap more trouble for them little critters!" Hiram said.

He heard a tree crash to the ground and saw an old beaver directing two younger ones along a natural skid road they had made upstream. They were sliding a five-foot log toward the creek. It splashed into the water, floated downstream. At the dam, two beavers caught it, took it to the bottom and anchored it there. Later, the colony of beavers carried branches and mud to plug the break in the dam, and again the water rose to form a mile-long lake. In some strange manner, the nester felt encouraged.

All that day, he had neglected his own work and watched the beavers. He started to turn toward his soddy, when a twig cracked in willows on the opposite bank of the creek. Hiram's gaze searched the thicket. He saw a huge, bearded man come from the brush and stand looking at the beaver lodge with calculating glance. That man was an enemy to all wild creatures!

Hiram went downstream and crossed the narrow stream below the dam. He moved almost soundlessly toward the big man, catching him unawares. He was right behind the fellow, ready to speak to him. Then, he heard the sound of shod hoofs moving across the flat beyond the thicket in which he stood. For a moment, he was paralyzed with indecision, for he recognized Bob Greer at the head of those three riders. Cold fear froze the nester in his tracks.

There was only one reason why the big cattleman should be paying the nester family a visit. Hiram cussed softly under his breath.

The big, bearded man heard him, whipped around quickly, with a hand dropping to a keen-bladed skinning knife in a belt scabbard. He glared at Hiram Wells through stony black eyes under bushy black brows.

"What you mean sneakin' up on a man like that!" he said gruffly.

Hiram stiffened. He sniffed disdainfully, took a look at the blood, grease and dirt on the other man's clothing. The big fellow exuded the odor of musk and hides. His profession was indicated by the skinning knife.

"You're a blamed trapper," Hiram accused as though to be one was the vilest of all crimes on Willow Creek. "I know danged well why you're awatchin' them beaver out there."

The big man chuckled. "I bin kind of lookin' 'em up," he admitted. "Looks to me like they're part of a colony that got away from me over on Big Bushy couple months ago. I dynamited a cluster of six lodges and got most of 'em, but there's always a few git away on a man."

"Now you're after these," Hiram drawled coldly. "You aim to kill them!"

The trapper missed the bitterness in Hiram's tone. He grinned broadly. "I knowed they wouldn't git away for long," he admitted. "A man like me understands beaver habit. They'll leave one place, go upstream or downstream. Or if they've been bothered considerable, like dynamiting, they'll look for another crick. I figured I'd find this bunch somewhere over here on Willow Crick. Too late in the season now for their fur to be prime, but I aim to get me some traps and take this lot. They'll bring a few extry dollars to total up the season's catch. No need a man like me passin' 'em up when I can have 'em for the taking."

HIRAM WELLS swallowed hard. He heard the hoof-beats of those cattlemen approaching. Fury lashed through his mind. Those doggoned cowmen intended to do to him and his folks exactly what that big trapper hoped to do to those other settlers, the beavers. Here on the Cross-Arrow outfit, no man or animal had homestead rights! Without fighting for them!

"You ain't takin' no beaver from this colony, mister!" Hiram declared.

The trapper looked slightly startled. His dark eyes hardened. His grin perished and his face darkened.

"Maybe you aim to beat me to 'em?" he surmised.

Hiram shook his head. He swept a hand across the range. "They're on my place. I own this land. I got my homestead rights. I aim to see nobody bothers them beaver, mister. I'm kind of fond of them."

The trapper frowned. "Are you plumb crazy, nester?" He chuckled dryly deep in his barrel-like chest. He brought the skinning knife up from scabbard, tested the blade with his thumb significantly. "What Big Jules wants, he usually takes," he said bluntly. "Ain't no man ever licked me, nester. I want them beaver, and I figure I'll get 'em—and to hell with your homestead rights!" He slashed with the knife as though slitting Hiram's throat. "I could kill you so easy as thees!" he declared gruffly.

Hiram swung with a right foot that came up from the ground. The foot smacked soundly against the other man's wrist. The knife left his hand and he howled with pain. Then, like a bull, he lunged at Hiram, fists swinging.

The nester side-stepped that mad rush, caught the trapper with a stiff-armed right that almost stopped him in his tracks. Behind the fighters, four riders pulled up their horses. They sat there in saddles, solemn spectators.

"When you're through with him, Jules, I'd like to have the greasy spots that's left to oil my boots," said Big Bob Greer, chuckling softly. "That dang nester has given me a heap of trouble."

Across the creek, the beavers stopped sliding down the mud shoot where they had been playing. They lined up on the bank, with their heads above water grass, as though gravely interested in the outcome of the fight between the

nester and the trapper. Jules bored in like a demon, driving Hiram back.

All the fury in Hiram Wells was unleashed by a blow from the trapper's fist that caught him squarely on the forehead. The wallop stung, almost blinded him, staggering him slightly. Then, he side-stepped another bullish rush, threw a right at the big man's bearded jaw. The fist connected solidly. Big Jules went down. Hiram stood over him, but he didn't come up for more. The nester trembled with a terrible rage.

"Dang!" exclaimed Bob Greer. "That nester's a tough one. He's whipped Big Jules—somethin' no man ever done before!"

Those words caused Hiram to remember the cattleman's mission. He turned on those grim-faced riders. "Dang you," he declared in a tone of fury, "I don't aim to budge from that place of mine. I've got homestead rights, and I aim to hold it! I intend to farm this place. So, you gun-hung varmints can come at me in a bunch, right now," he challenged furiously. "Or you can pile off that hoss and fight me man-to-man, Bob Greer—if you've got the guts!"

Bob Greer looked down solemnly at Hiram as though he had not heard. His gaze shifted to the lake and the beaver lodge out there. A thoughtful expression crossed his heavy face. He frowned down at the unconscious trapper.

"There's never been water in Willow Creek all summer long since I've been runnin' cows on this range," he drawled. "Now, them beavers have backed up a lake of good, clear water for a mile or more behind their dam. They'll build more dams, and they'll hold the water for my cows—and your crops, Hiram."

Hiram Wells gasped with disbelief. "You mean you'll stop tryin' to drive—!"

Bob Greer shook his huge head and chuckled softly. "I don't aim to fight no man who can lick Big Jules with his bare fists," he said solemnly. "And I'd be plumb foolish to chouse off a man who'll squat out here with his family and keep trappers from killing my beavers. You'll be plumb valuable to me, Hiram."

Hiram gasped happily. "I'm sure glad to hear that, Mr. Greer."

"Shucks, Hiram, you fought for your homestead rights and for our beavers," drawled Bob Greer, letting his gaze drift toward the soddy beyond the creek. "Now, I'd be plumb mean and ungrateful if I didn't offer to stake you to some money for lumber to build yourself a house—anc' a doctor to see that Sis gits along all right." His eyes filled with mock-lightning and he looked down at the nester. "Why, hell, Hiram, what you grinning about?"

Hiram Wells was so plumb filled with happiness he couldn't say a word. Across the creek, the beavers splashed into water and a wise old buck led that procession, swimming toward the lodge. Hiram looked at them and wished he could tell them that everything was all right now.

It shorely was!

Follow the exploits of Pink Perkins and Rowdy Vaughan of the Flying U as they tangle with a rustler band in

WILD HORSE RANGE

A NOVEL BY

B. M. BOWER

NEXT ISSUE!

Pursuing troopers catch
Don Diego's black horse—
and with it bait a trap
for the rider of
the night!

ZORRO'S STOLEN STEED

THE head servant of the Vega casa in Reina de Los Angeles appeared in the patio, where Don Alejandro Vega and his son Diego, were sitting beside the gurgling fountain, half asleep after a heavy midday meal.

The head servant was a peon whose hair had grown gray in the house service of the Vegas. He was unusually well trained, hence Don Alejandro and Diego knew something was amiss, else the servant never would have intruded in

By JOHNSTON McCULLEY

the patio at such an hour.

"Well—?" Don Alejandro asked. His tone was that of a grandee prepared to admonish severely if this intrusion proved to be unworthy of a breach of house rules.

"Your pardon for disturbing you, Don Alejandro, and yours, young master. But Don Diego's mute bodyservant, Bernardo, is at the kitchen door, and we make out from his actions and his guttural rumblings that something ill has happened, and that he desires to see Don Diego immediately. He nodded his head vigorously when I asked him if that were so. He appears to be in a state of great excitement, so I was bold enough to come here at once."

Diego was upon his feet. He glanced quickly at his father and received a nod of permission.

"Let us have Bernardo here immediately," Diego ordered.

The servant disappeared, and in a short time returned with Bernardo at his heels. The gigantic mute peon bent and knuckled his forehead in respect to Diego and his father. At Diego's gesture, the house servant left the patio.

ONE glance at Bernardo was enough to reveal that he was greatly excited over something that had occurred. He made strange guttural sounds, and lines of agony were in his face—the agony of a man unable to talk, yet with important information to impart as speedily as possible.

"You are ill? . . . someone has been hurt? . . . there has been a fire among the buildings? . . . something is wrong in the pueblo?" Diego asked the questions in turn.

To each, Bernardo shook his head negatively. His agony seemed to increase, as did his guttural rumblings.

"Calm yourself!" Diego ordered. "Let me try to get at it. Has the matter something to do with—" Diego did not finish the sentence, but dipped a finger into the water of the fountain, and on the flagstone quickly wrote the letter Z.

Frenzied guttural sounds came from Bernardo's throat, and he bobbed his head up and down in excitement.

"So—something to do with Zorro," Diego said in a low tone to his father.

Bernardo, Don Alejandro, and Fray Felipe, the aged Franciscan padre at the pueblo chapel, were the only persons who knew that Don Diego Vega, considered a spineless fop, was also Zorro, the wild masked rider of the hills who punished the oppressors of peons and natives.

"What could it be?" Don Alejandro asked. "Something surely has happened. I never saw Bernardo so excited before. What a cruel thing it is to be born without the power of speech!"

Bernardo showered gutturals at them again, then sprang forward and knelt beside the fountain, where there was a space of bare dirt between two of the flagstones. With a forefinger, he began drawing something in the dirt. Diego bent over him to watch.

"He is trying to draw something—looks like a horse," Diego said to his father.

Bernardo rumbled again and bobbed his head.

"It is a horse?" Diego asked.

Bernardo nodded that it was. And then, as Diego watched, the mute bent forward again, and with his forefinger drew a ragged letter Z on the animal's hip.

"You mean Zorro's horse?" Diego asked.

Bernardo nodded that he did. Then with a wide gesture, he wiped out the sketch and the letter, and gestured on toward the fountain.

"Listen carefully, Bernardo," Diego commanded. "The horse of Zorro . . . is it sick? . . . dead? . . . has it been hurt?"

Bernardo shook his head to those questions, and seemed to be trying to explain with sweeping gestures.

"Is the horse gone?" Diego asked.

Bernardo nodded assent.

"Did he break out of the little corral?"

Bernardo indicated the horse had not. He knelt and drew in the dirt with his finger again—a circle meaning the corral. He put a horse in the corral. He walked his two fingers forward like a

man walking, make tracks around the gate of the corral, and drew a line to show the gate had been pulled open.

"Somebody stole the horse?" Diego asked.

Bernardo's excitement showed Diego had guessed correctly.

"Did the soldiers find him? No? Thieves—?"

The mute nodded furiously again.

"Could you tell how many?"

Bernardo held up three fingers, then another. Three thieves, and possibly four, that meant.

"Zorro's costume and weapons, are they safe in the hiding place?"

Bernardo nodded that they were.

"Thanks, Bernardo," Diego said. "Do not go near the corral again. Stay around the huts here at the house. Get something to eat, and rest."

BERNARDO stumbled away through an arch of the patio, and Diego sat beside his father. They spoke in low tones, lest some softly-walking house servant overhear them.

"There has been a band of horse thieves working through the rancho country recently, my son," Don Alejandro said. "It is possible they stumbled upon the little hidden corral and took the big black. They may not know he belongs to Zorro."

"I branded the letter Z on his hip two years ago in a moment of silly bravado," Diego muttered. "My splendid black horse, so well trained! How many adventures I have had upon his back! How many times his strength and intelligence have saved me—"

"Cease moaning and concentrate on what to do," his father interrupted.

"The corral, of course, must never be used again," Diego said. "If the thieves get away with the horse, I shall have to train another, and Zorro's work will end until the new horse is trained. But I'll never find another like the one stolen."

"Troopers have been watching for the thieves," Don Alejandro reminded him. "Only fine saddle mounts have been stolen, and it is thought they are being taken down the Sonora trail into Mexico and sold there to unscrupulous buyers. If the soldiers catch the thieves—"

"If they do—what?" Diego asked. "Other owners of stolen stock can claim their animals. But can I go forward and say the big black is mine—can I claim the horse bearing Zorro's brand?"

"Here is an enigma worthy of the genius of Zorro," his father suggested.

"And can I trail the thieves and attack them as Zorro and regain my black horse? What horse will I ride while I do that? Have I another I have trained so well? Would Zorro dare risk himself in a tight corner on a strange horse?"

"The horse probably was taken during the night," Don Alejandro said. "We can do nothing but await developments."

"I wish I had left the horse out at our rancho," Diego mourned. "But I thought I might have need of him close to me."

They were silent suddenly, listening. From the distant plaza came sounds of a din. Men were shouting, and boots were pounding the hard earth as men ran. Don Alejandro and Diego moved toward the door to enter the house, and in the doorway met the head servant again, and saw he was excited.

"What is the tumult, Estéban?" Don Alejandro asked him.

"The soldiers have caught horse thieves, Don Alejandro! The report is they were taken on the Sonora trail. Two thieves were shot and killed in the fighting, and two taken prisoner. Twelve horses were recovered, and the soldiers have them now at the plaza. It is said the thieves have confessed but will be tortured and questioned further at the barracks during tonight, and hanged in the plaza in the morning."

Diego went with his father to the plaza, where half the men of the pueblo had congregated. Diego appeared his usual indolent, foppish self. He stooped as he shuffled along beside his father, and brushed his nostrils with a scented lace handkerchief. His manner said that all this tumult annoyed him.

"Is there danger of the horse, if he is among the stolen animals, recognizing you, my son?" Don Alejandro asked.

"No danger of that. I always dressed

in Zorro's black costume, with my mask, before going to where Bernardo had the horse saddled and waiting. And I always used the voice of Zorro, and not my own, while with the horse. But he would recognize Bernardo quickly, for Bernardo always saddled him and got him ready, and petted him."

They came to the edge of the crowd, and peons and natives stepped aside to let them pass. They caught sight of the big black horse with the other stolen animals which had been recovered by the troopers. The big black stood with head upflung, a proud animal who seemed to look with scorn upon the chattering men around him.

DIEGO saw Sergeant Manual Garcia, of the barracks, who was in command of the detachment of troopers that had caught the thieves. And the burly sergeant saw Diego in turn.

"Ah, Don Diego, *amigo,* a greeting to you!" the big sergeant roared in welcome. "Look what we have here! We have not caught this rogue of a Zorro yet, but we have his black horse. Look, what a monster he is! Strength and stamina and intelligence in that animal! Small wonder our poor army horses could never catch him."

"What will you do with the stolen stock, sergeant?" Diego asked.

"The horses have their ears notched, and may be reclaimed by their owners. But that big black—nobody will put in an ownership claim for him, eh?" The sergeant roared his laughter. "A little dangerous for the rogue to come forward and ask for his horse. So he will be condemned by the *magistrado,* Pedro Casillas, as unclaimed stolen property, and sold."

"Ah? I would not mind buying him and sending him out to the Vega rancho," Diego hinted. "He is indeed a splendid animal."

"Ha! Don Diego, *amigo,* do not waste your gold. The Vega rancho is overrun with fine horse stock now. And there is perhaps a curse of some sort on this mount of a rascal of a highwayman who will yet be caught and hanged. He would bring you bad luck. And there is another thing—" Sergeant Garcia lowered his voice.

"And that—?" Diego questioned.

"Pedro Casillas, the rascal of a *magistrado,* who is by no means averse to lining his pockets with tainted gold, is already arguing about the sale of the horse to Carlos Avalos, the rich trader, who stands over there dressed in fine raiment and with jeweled rings on his fingers and struts around to ape his betters."

Diego brushed his nostrils with the scented handkerchief at mention of the trader's name. "What does Avalos want with the horse?" Diego asked.

"Ah! He has a certain scheme, in which I am to play a part. Step aside with me, Don Diego, where there are not so many open ears."

They walked aside with Don Alejandro.

"'Tis like this," Garcia told them in a low voice. "Carlos Avalos buys the animal and takes him to where his trader's caravan is encamped a mile out of the pueblo on the San Juan Capistrano trail. Then he awaits the moment Zorro will make an effort to regain his horse, if the rogue has that much courage. And Zorro will come into a trap—for I will have troopers watching for his arrival. This time we'll have the rogue! And—naturally—the reward for his capture will be split by me with Señor Carlos Avalos, with the rascal of a *magistrado,* Pedro Casillas, coming in for a small share."

"'Tis a pretty plot," Diego admitted, his eyes twinkling.

A trooper called the sergeant, and he hurried away. The deal for the horse had been consummated. Avalos, the trader, seized the rope looped around the big black's neck.

"You are now mine, you black demon!" Avalos shouted, so that all could hear. "You have a new master. Behave yourself, or you'll know what a lash really means. Come with me!"

Avalos jerked on the rope unusually hard, and the noose halter tightened around the big black's neck. The horse

gave a choked scream and reared. Avalos was yanked off his feet. The black struck at him with a forefoot and knocked the trader flying into the dust. He would have gone ahead with punishment, but men seized the rope and kept him back.

Don Alejandro had seen Diego tense, and warned him swiftly in low tones.

"Careful, my son! You can have vengeance for mistreatment of the horse later."

IT was well that his father had spoken so. For Diego saw Avalos struggle to his feet and yank a whip from the hands of a man standing near.

"Hold that black demon!" he yelled. "Hold him well! I'll teach him—!"

He sprang forward and cut with the whip. The lash slashed the black's neck. Then the horse indeed became a demon. He jerked off their feet the men who held the rope, struck with his feet, tried to bite. The crowd scattered and ran. But one of the men took a quick turn around a post with the rope and they circled the black around the post until the rope was wound and the horse was snubbed.

"Keep him so until some of my men come to take him to my camp," Avalos panted. "I'll punish the demon there! A highwayman's horse, is he? If this Zorro doesn't like the way I treat his mount, let him come and tell me about it!"

Diego touched his father on the arm. "Let us get away from this spot and return home, before I betray myself," he whispered. "Zorro has a score to settle with Señor Carlos Avalos, and with Pedro Casillas, the *magistrado*, for selling the horse to such a beast!"

Back at the house, Diego went among the huts in the rear and located Bernardo and took him aside.

"Listen carefully, Bernardo," he instructed. "After fall of night, you will get the costume and weapons of Zorro and take them cautiously to the little ravine a half mile out the San Juan Capistrano trail."

Bernardo nodded that he understood the order.

"Wait there in hiding until I come and help me dress and put on the weapons. Do not forget to bring my whip."

For the remainder of the day, Diego wandered around the house, sat in the patio, read poetry, ate fruit, and conducted himself in the usual manner, so the house servants would not grow suspicious of his actions.

He shared the evening meal with his father, and while one of the servants served meat and poured wine, he remarked so the man would hear:

"I have a headache coming on, I fear, my father. With your permission I'll retire early and rest."

"You have a plan, my son?" Don Alejandro asked, when the servant had left the room.

"A bold one, my father. Perhaps it would be best if you knew nothing of it in advance."

"Use great care, Diego. It may be a dangerous trap. Nothing ill must happen to you."

"I know that," Diego said, nodding. And he did know what it would mean if it was learned that Don Diego Vega was Zorro. The angry Governor would have him hanged despite his noble blood. His father, no doubt, would be exiled to Mexico or Spain, and the Vega estates would be confiscated and the money gobbled up by the Governor and his henchmen. And his father would die of disgrace and shame that his only son and heir had been executed publicly, like a common thief of the highway.

Diego contacted Bernardo again when he came to Diego's rooms after the meal, to see if there were special orders, as the mute did every evening.

"You will take the black's saddle and bridle and gear with you to the spot I mentioned," Diego ordered. "I'll explain the remainder of my plan when we meet in the ravine."

There was a half moon that night, with clouds scudding in from the sea and half obscuring it at times. Diego got out of the house without being observed, and walked cautiously to the distant ravine. It was almost midnight when he reached it.

Bernardo was waiting. Diego dressed

swiftly, and became the masked Zorro. He buckled on his blade, thrust knife and pistol into his belt, and coiled the long whip to carry in his left hand.

"You will wait here until I return," he instructed. "If I get the horse, I'll ride him bareback, and do you be ready to help me bridle and saddle him here."

Again he strode away through the night, but now as Zorro, the masked righter of wrongs, the avenger.

He knew the terrain well and kept in depressions and dark areas as he approached the spot beside the highway where he knew Carlos Avalos' caravan was encamped. He had learned that Avalos had five peons in his crew, but did not fear them. They would not have weapons, since it was against the law for peons to go armed. And they would bolt at the first sign of violence.

BUT Zorro did not know how many of Garcia's troopers might be at the trader's camp, nor where they would be hidden. So he used extreme caution as he neared the camp, stopping frequently to listen and watch for moving shadows when the moon was not hidden by clouds.

He came finally to the crest of a high bank overlooking the camp, and went prone on the earth to make reconnaissance. A small campfire was burning in the center of the camp. A tent was pitched near the fire. The carts were parked in a row at the side of the highway. Two men were squatted beside the fire—peons half asleep with their heads bent on arms that crossed their knees, serapes draped around their shoulders.

And Zorro saw the horse. The big black was tied to a heavy post, and around him had been constructed a tiny corral of logs and brush. The horse stood proudly, head uplifted, watching, listening.

No sounds told Zorro where troopers might be hiding. Perhaps, he hoped, since the hour was so late, Avalos and Sergeant Garcia had decided Zorro would not make the attempt to recover his horse tonight.

Zorro got to his feet in a dark spot beside a huge rock. He watched and listened for a time longer. Then he made his way cautiously down to the level of the highway and crouched in a spot of darkness there. He cupped his hands to his mouth, and gave a long, piercing peculiar cry.

From his position, he could still see the horse. The animal reared up and hurled himself against the makeshift corral at the end of the rope which held him to the post. He squealed when Zorro gave the cry again.

The horse's squeal served a good purpose. Carlos Avalos, half dressed, rushed from his tent, a pistol held ready. The two men at the fire sprang up and darted to the side of the row of carts. And Zorro saw a trooper emerge from a shadow and hurry toward the fire.

Zorro gave his wild cry a third time. The horse became a raging demon. He reared and tugged, squealing at every move. He snapped the heavy rope and charged against the corral and crashed through it and was free. He stood proudly in the middle of the highway as Avalos and the trooper started toward him.

Zorro gave the cry again. The horse charged along the highway toward the sound of his voice. At the proper moment, Zorro ran out into the moonlight and called again. The black swerved and ran to him, squealing, and stopped. Zorro swung upon his back and grasped the horse's flowing mane and kicked with his heels.

Troopers appeared suddenly in the trail. Firearms were discharged and bullets flew near Zorro as he bent low over the black's neck and rode like a madman. The troopers were shouting and running for their horses, which had been hidden behind the rocks.

Zorro heard Sergeant Garcia bellowing orders. A mounted trooper appeared in the trail b e f o r e him, and Zorro whipped out his blade and charged. The trooper fired a pistol, but the shot went wild as the man's horse swerved. Zorro slashed with his blade as he passed, wounding the man, and rode on.

Before the pounding hoofs of the pursuit could be heard, Zorro was around a curve in the highway, and left it to ride

carefully up a bank and down into a depression. He got back to where Bernardo was waiting, sprang off the black's back, and helped the mute put bridle and saddle on the horse.

"Go to the end of the orchard in the pueblo," Zorro told the mute. "Wait there for me."

He did not return to the trader's camp, but rode to town and to the house of Pedro Casillas, the *magistrado*, who was a widower and lived alone except for an old peon male servant. Zorro put the black at a low stone fence and cleared it. He crashed through the garden and stopped at the front door, to bend from the saddle and pound on the door with the butt of his pistol.

"Casillas! Hasten!" he called in a voice not his own.

A LIGHT gleamed through a window. Zorro heard a bolt being withdrawn, and the door was opened to reveal Casillas in a heavy nightshirt and a tasselled sleeping cap holding a taper aloft and blinking sleep-heavy eyes.

"Out here, señor, or I pistol you!" Zorro told him. "At once!"

Before he realized what he was doing, Casillas obeyed the rough command. Zorro swerved the black into the streak of light from the taper. The *magistrado* gulped and his eyes bulged.

"I am Zorro! Cheap thief that you are, you will put every peso you got from the sale of my horse to Avalos in the poor box at the chapel immediately. If you do not, I shall visit you again when you least expect it, and send a pistol ball into your obese carcass!"

"I—I—it shall be done, señor," Casillas gulped.

"Do not forget it, if you wish to live. Come forward another step."

"I but did as the law requires—" Casillas whimpered.

"Do not lie to me!"

Zorro had thrust the pistol back into his sash and grabbed the coiled whip on his saddle. And now the lash sang through the air to cut into the *magistrado's* fat. He dropped the taper and howled, his wild cries ringing through the night, and turned to run back into the house. But the whip encircled him and jerked him back, and then the lash cut and stung, and the louder Casillas yelled and cried for both mercy and help, the more Zorro was pleased.

For he had heard riders down by the barracks, and presumed some of the troopers had returned from their wild futile chase, and knew the cries would attract them. He gave Casillas a last cut with the whip, and rode.

He circled the town, where lights were appearing and men were shouting at one another. Parallel to the highway, he rode with caution back toward the trader's camp. He saw two troopers pass with mounts at a run, going toward the town.

Past the camp, he turned the black down into the highway and stopped to reconnoitre. He could see Avalos at the fire, which had been built up with fresh fuel. Two of his peons were near the trader. Nobody else was in sight.

Zorro loped the black forward slowly, watching the shadows, pistol held ready. Finally he passed through a wide streak where a high bank cut off the light of the moon and jumped his horse toward the fire.

Carlos Avalos whirled around to see vengeance rushing down upon him. The frightened trader fired the pistol he held, and the ball went wild. His peons yelled and began running down the highway toward the town.

Since the trader had fired his pistol, Zorro tucked his own into his sash and got his whip again. The lash caught Avalos as he was darting into his tent, and jerked him back and sent him sprawling. Zorro's whip sang and cut, and Avalos made a wild outcry as he tried to shield his head with his arms.

"Scoundrel!" Zorro barked at him. "Mistreater of horses! Did you hope to hold my horse in your miserable corral? Leave this vicinity at dawn, señor, with your caravan, and do not let me find you near Reina de Los Angeles again, ever!"

He lashed until Avalos' cries became only whimpers. And then he coiled his whip and attached it to the pommel of

his saddle again, and tightened the reins a trifle and rode.

And he rode into fresh trouble.

In the trail ahead, revealed clearly by the moonlight, Sergeant Manuel Garcia sat his horse and waited, bending forward in his saddle, pistol held ready.

"Yield yourself, Señor Zorro!" the burly sergeant shouted. "Yield, or I fire! Stop your horse, toss aside your weapons—"

Zorro spurred and charged, bending low in his saddle.

Sergeant Garcia fired, and the ball from the pistol burned across Zorro's left sleeve. Garcia tossed his pistol aside and drew his blade.

"I thought you'd return here, rogue, when you deemed it safe!" Garcia yelled. "Heard my troopers returning to the pueblo, did you? Thought the trader was alone? Come at me, scoundrel! I'll earn the Governor's reward alone!"

Some time long before, Zorro had crossed blades with the burly sergeant and had wounded him slightly. But perhaps Garcia had practiced swordsmanship since then. Zorro did not wish to injure Garcia unless it was unavoidable. Diego Vega posed as the sergeant's friend, and the sergeant let drop words that put Zorro often on guard.

But now he charged, his own blade flashing through the moonlight, and put the big black straight at the sergeant's mount, which also was a large powerful animal. The black staggered the other horse, and Garcia's cut and thrust both missed. Zorro did not cut with his blade. He gave a quick thrust as the mounts bumped again, and the point of his weapon went through the sergeant's right shoulder and made him quickly drop his blade.

"Bad fortune for you, sergeant!" Zorro yelled. "Until the next time—ádios!"

One trooper came thundering toward them. As Zorro spurred away again, he fired his pistol at the trooper to deter pursuit, and saw the soldier turn aside to help the sergeant.

Away from the highway, Zorro rode with extreme care, coming finally to where Bernardo was waiting. He sprang out of the saddle and began removing the costume of Zorro.

"Ride the horse to the rancho and hide him in the usual place, Bernardo," Don Diego Vega instructed. "Hide the costume and weapons also. Use great care."

As Bernardo began gathering up costume and weapons to make them into a bundle for carrying, Diego strode away through the streaks of moonlight. Some time later he slipped into the house, to find his father waiting.

"It is well, my son?" Don Alejandro asked.

"Pedro Casillas has been punished and ordered to put his stained money into the poor box. The trader has been whipped. The big sergeant has a wound in his shoulder. And the horse of Zorro has been recovered, and is now on his way to the rancho, where he will be safe. All is well, my father—*sí!*" Don Diego Vega replied.

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ZORRO

To Appear in Coming Issues!

On the JERICO ROAD

by ALLAN K. ECHOLS

The old prospector clapped spurs to his horse

Joe Lowery's first try at highway robbery is a failure, but —

THE placer gold strike a few months before had made the trail to Willow Gulch a busy connecting link with the outside world. The trail had been widened enough to accommodate wagons and stage coaches. It bore a heavy traffic of miners and prospectors, of merchants and gamblers, of rich and of poor.

Fortunes were being made, being lost —and being stolen. The trees in the autumn were decorated with gold leaves —and with the swinging bodies of road agents, thieves and murderers.

A young man by the name of Joe Lowery was hidden in the rocks over a cut in the trail, a pistol in his hand, his eye on an approaching horseman. The man on horseback was coming from the diggings which had followed the gulch for five miles up its length, diggings which were still proving rich.

Hidden in the woods back of Lowery on one side of the road, a big blond man who called himself Dodge, waited on a horse. With him, was a dark and silent man who called himself Keno. No other name.

Young Lowery felt his heart bobbing up in his throat, and cursed himself for being a nervous fool. Sure, this was his

first robbery, but Dodge had told him everything to do. Prospectors weren't men who wanted to shoot it out with road agents, anyway. They thought more of their lives than they did a poke or a fruitjar of gold dust and nuggets.

The man on the horse drew nearer, approached to within two horse-lengths of young Lowery, and then Lowery raised up from behind his rock and spoke sharply as his gun covered the man.

"All right," he said, "get those hands up."

The horseman had the marks of the prospector on him, all right, clay-stained clothes, wool shirt with the sleeves rolled up over long-sleeved underwear, dirty hands. He needed a haircut and shave. He was not young, past fifty, Lowery judged, and he did not seem to be particularly afraid. Instead of elevating his hands, he dropped them both onto the horn of the saddle.

Lowery slid down the few feet of cutbank and approached the horse, keeping the man covered. "I said to get your hands up!" he ordered in a voice as severe as he could make it.

The old man turned his head and spat tobacco juice into the wind, then looked him over curiously.

"What is this?" he demanded. "You aren't trying to hold me up, are you?"

"What do you think I'm doing?" Lowery answered. "Get off that horse." He waved his pistol.

The old man did not move, but studied him more carefully. "You don't look much more than voting age," he said. "Mighty young to get your neck stretched, aren't you?"

LOWERY was now at the horse's head. His face was burning with anger at the old man for refusing to obey his orders. He did not like to be reminded of the hangings road agents had been getting. He caught the horse's bridle.

"I said get down out of that saddle! I'll take care of my own neck."

"You won't if you're figuring on being a road agent. Better think it over."

"Get off that horse or I'll put a bullet through you. And *you* think that over!"

The old man said, "Son, I don't like to think of being responsible for you stretchin' a rope. If you need a stake, I'll give it to you."

"Are you getting down?" Lowery snapped. He was feeling uncomfortable now. "Or do I shoot you down off that horse?"

"Now, I don't believe a nice looking young fellow like you would shoot an old man in cold blood. Look me up if you take a notion you can use that stake. Name's Luke Drake."

Suddenly the old horseman leaned forward in his saddle, threw spurs into his animal and yelled at him. The horse bolted, jerking free of Lowery's hold on the bit. The old man slapped the animal on the neck with his hat, and before Lowery could recover from his surprise, the mounted prospector had disappeared around the bend in the road.

Lowery stood in the road confused, angry and thoroughly disgusted with himself. He had thought he could carry it off without a hitch, but he had turned chicken-hearted. He already had a good idea of what Dodge was going to say to him. He dreaded that.

He turned and left the road, prompted by the sight of a wagon appearing in the distance. He made his way through the trees to his horse, and got into the saddle, heading down the path that led to their camp deeper in the hills. In a few minutes Keno and Dodge rode up and joined him.

Dodge looked at him comtemptuously. "Say it!" he snapped. "What got into you? Your liver turn white?"

Lowery bowed his head, feeling the shame in him. "I just couldn't do it," he said. "I reckon I'm not cut out for this kind of work."

"Yellow," Dodge said scornfully. "You could have killed him half a dozen times. Why didn't you shoot him the minute he didn't stick his hands up? Like I told you to. What happened?"

Lowery told him everything, trying to make him see things as he saw them. "I couldn't put a bullet through the middle of the man's back as he rode away, could I?"

"Why couldn't you? You could have done it before that. You haven't got the sense you was born with. You're a fool!"

"I reckon I am," Lowery admitted. "I guess I'd better pull out of this business."

Dodge was a big man with a square face and light hair and whiskers. There was a humorless twist to his face as he turned to Keno. "He says he's pulling

out on us. Ain't that funny?"

Keno seldom did more than shrug unless a direct answer was called for. He looked at Lowery, then back at Dodge, and shrugged.

Dodge said, "Well, young fellow, you don't just pull out of a partnership with me. I told you I was going to show you how to make this business pay, and that's what I'm going to do—or leave you dead. It would be nice, wouldn't it, to have you runnin' around loose tellin' everybody about me training men for this work? Now you come right along back to camp with me and Keno, and don't let me hear you make another squawk about running out on us. You're going to do what I tell you, or you're going to be just another set of bones somebody will find in the mountains some day. Come on."

The camp was in a high draw, overlooking Willow Gulch and safe in the timbered mountainside. The three men loafed around it the rest of the afternoon in strained silence. Lowery got off to the side and sat on a stump, ashamed and disgusted with himself, and more than a little afraid of the man who had talked him into being a road agent.

He regretted the step now, but apparently Dodge had no intention of letting him change his mind. Lowery had come into Willow Gulch driving a span of mules for a man who was bringing in a supply of lumber and liquor to start a saloon. But he had had no luck since arriving. Broke, hungry, he had tried to get work, but in the buzzing activity that makes up a boom gold camp, he had little success. There wasn't any of the kind of work he could do. He had got one day's work driving a wild team, and one of the horses had kicked him and broken his arm.

HE was in a bad way, but this man, who called himself Dodge, and who seemed to have plenty of money, had taken care of him and, playing on his desperation and his bitterness at the man whose horse had kicked him, and who had refused to help him recover, Dodge had convinced him that there was not only no law in Willow Gulch—but no justice, either. It was up to every man to look out for himself.

"Shucks!" Dodge had said. "These men are not any more entitled to this gold than you are. It don't belong to them any more than to you or me. They just happened to be the lucky ones that stumbled on it."

"But I don't know anything about that kind of business," Lowery had protested. "I'd get caught first thing."

"Not if you listen to me," Dodge had said. "I've been in this business a long time. How you think I got the money I got? Not by getting down in the mud and washing gravel in a pan. I been around here since this place started booming, and they ain't caught me, have they? They don't even suspect me."

Lowery had gone out and tried to find work a few more times after his arm got well but not strong, but nobody had time for him, and this increased his resentment, but softened him up for Dodge.

"Look," Dodge said, "I been figuring on a tight little bunch of three of us, and I got another man lined up. Feller by the name of Keno. He keeps his mouth shut, and he's got brains. We'll clean up."

"Or string up," Lowery answered fearfully, but his objections had been growing weaker.

"Not a chance. Here's where these other boys make their mistake. They get hoggish, go after stages and wagons they think have got big loads of dust and nuggets. We'll stay in the woods, pick off the single travelers moving back and forth. You could knock off one a day with less risk and more profit than you could hitting for the big hauls. Everybody's too busy to worry about a single prospector losing his poke. Nobody won't care."

Lowery had thus allowed himself to be talked into this thing. Dodge was going to show him all the tricks. Keno had joined them, and Dodge said he'd teach him how it was done as soon as he got through instructing Lowery. As he explained it, the others would stand back while each man did his job alone, and after Lowery and Keno learned the fine points, they would all three take turns robbing the stray riders, and thus the victims, if they lived, would not be able to get together on the description of any one bandit. Dodge was a man who thought of everything.

Dodge moved around the camp impatiently, and Lowery kept out of the way of his sharp tongue.

"A day wasted," Dodge complained.

"We can't afford to take another chance tonight, because you let that man get away. He might spread the word down in Willow Gulch, and everybody will be on the lookout for us."

He turned to Keno, who sat on a deadfall, whittling. "Keno, you go into town and see what you can learn."

Keno silently closed his knife, took his easy time about saddling his horse, then rode off without a word.

"Now there's a man I like," Dodge said to Lowery. "Keeps his mind on his business and his mouth shut."

"How do you know he's any good?" Lowery returned. "He hasn't had his try yet. He might be just as poor a hand at it as me."

"Don't be a fool! You can look at him and know he'll do what he sets out to do."

"I reckon I'm not cut out for this business," Lowery answered.

"You said that before, but you ain't quitting. I set out to train you and Keno, and I'm going to do it. Don't get any notions of deserting. Tomorrow, you're going to go down to the road and hit the first man that passes. You're going to do it right, or I'll take care of you good and proper."

Time dragged, and Keno came back into camp late after dark.

"Didn't hear a thing," he said in answer to Dodge's question. "If the man complained, nobody seems to have heard about it. Anyway, there ain't a posse out. Some of the boys have cleaned up their claims and are leaving out on the Jerico Road. Might hit it."

"See! What'd I tell you?" Dodge gloated. "Nobody's going to notice just one man losing a little poke of dust. But add up all we'll get and it will mean real money. Now, in the morning we're settling down to real business. We'll try that Jerico Road."

THE next morning the three of them went over the hill to a point near the trail that came in from Jerico, the nearest railroad town a hundred miles to the south.

"Here's why we're going to hit here," Dodge said. "Like Keno says, some of the boys that had lean claims have washed 'em up, and will be going out with whatever gold they got, or if they had good ones and sold 'em, they'll be going out. Either way, they'll have money on them—and that's our meat."

Keno was naturally silent; Lowery was silent because he was in a turmoil. He had got enough of this business, and he wanted to get out, but he was afraid of Dodge. Dodge was a cold-blooded killer, and Lowery knew that Dodge would not risk having him free with his knowledge of Dodge's activities.

From their point of concealment in the trees beside the road they saw a wagon coming slowly from Willow Gulch. It was covered with canvas and drawn by a pair of good mules.

Dodge studied it carefully, then turned to Lowery. "Now's your chance to make up for that sucker play you made last night," he said. "One old man in a wagon, and if you can't handle him alone, then I'm going to knock your ears down. Now get ready. We'll be back outa sight. Come on, Keno, we'll give him this one more chance."

The wagon lumbered down through a draw and gradually approached Lowery. From his hiding place, Lowery saw an elderly man in the seat of the wagon, coming along unconcerned. There was something familiar about the man. As the wagon came closer, Lowery recognized him.

It was the old man he had tried to rob the night before. Lowery went cold. He recalled the old man's talk. The old man had said that if he needed a stake he'd give him one. Said his name was Luke Drake, and told the kid to look him up if he ever needed a stake. Come to think of it, that had been the only word of kindness Lowery had heard since the day he came to these diggings. He made up his mind in a flash.

He loosened the pistol in his belt. Then as the wagon got abreast of him, he pushed his horse out of the brush and up alongside the wagon in the road. The old man recognized him, and his face showed his surprise.

"Look here, old man," Lowery said quickly. "You got a gun, grab it up quick. There's a couple of men back in the woods. They intend to rob you. I'll help you. Get your gun up, if you've got one."

"Me?" the old man repeated. "I haven't got a gun."

"Shucks!" Lowery said. "Well, keep this team moving and I'll cover you. Better lay down in the bed of your wagon."

The old man slapped his team sharply

and moved them up faster. Lowery fell in beside the wagon, keeping his eyes peeled on the woods where Dodge and Keno had been hidden.

He had got hardly fifty feet when Dodge spurred his horse out of the woods. He saw the team and Lowery's horse moving along together.

"Hold it up, there," Dodge yelled, pulling his gun at the same time. "What is this?"

"We're going through, Dodge," the youth answered. "I'm leaving with this man. Get out of the way."

"Why you white-livered skunk!" Dodge answered. "Turnin' on me, are you? I'll show you!" He shouted for Keno over his shoulder, then spurred his horse down on the pair, rising in his stirrups and lifting his gun.

Lowery pulled his horse up short to steady him, and lifted his gun.

"Hold it!" he warned.

Dodge kept coming. He lifted his gun and threw a quick shot at Lowery. Lowery's animal bucked, and Lowery slid off and stood on the ground to get a steady footing. He was no wizard with a six-gun.

Dodge bore down on him, still firing from his unsteady perch in the saddle. Bullets whined around Lowery's head. The mule team reared and twisted to the side of the road. Dodge's next bullet took Lowery's hat off.

Then Lowery braced himself, took a steady aim, and sent a bullet through Dodge's chest. Dodge raised both hands, tried again to stand up in his stirrups, then fell over sideways. His panicked horse threw him into the ditch and raced into the woods.

LOWERY turned around as he heard thrashing in the woods beside him, and swung his gun around on Keno, just as Keno emerged into the road. Keno did not have his gun out. Seeing the gun pointed at him, he did not reach for his. Instead, he pulled his horse up and put his two hands on his saddle horn.

"You finish Dodge, did you, kid?" he asked.

"Yes, I reckon he's dead. And I'll finish you if you've got any ideas about going on and robbing this old man." Old Luke Drake had got his mules quieted and had crawled out of the wagon and joined Lowery.

The silent man's mouth showed a faint smile. "I wasn't thinking of going on and robbing him or anybody else, kid. As a matter of fact, I was appointed by the vigilance committee in Willow Gulch to get in with the robbers and find out who they were and break 'em up. You just saved me taking Dodge in for a hanging. I had you covered all the time, yesterday and now. If you'd tried to shoot the old man, I'd have shot you first."

Lowery felt a cold sweat break out all over him, realizing he had been in with Dodge, and would probably decorate the limb of a tree, even if he hadn't completed the only robbery he had tried. His potential victim was standing right here beside him to swear his neck into a noose.

"Then you'll be taking me, instead," he said wearily. "All right. I won't make you any trouble."

There was a little more of a smile on Keno's dark face. "I haven't seen you rob anybody," he said. "As a matter of fact, the only thing I've seen you do is to break up Dodge's efforts to rob this old man."

"That's right," the old man said. "I knew when I first seen this feller last night that he wasn't cut out for a road agent. He just ain't got the marks of the breed on him."

"No, he hasn't," Keno said. "The vigilance committee's job is to get rid of dangerous men, and I don't classify Lowery that way, do you?"

"Not by a jug full. Son, I told you last night I'd give you a stake if you asked for it. I got me a little dust out of that gulch, and I'm going back to my ranch close to Jerico and settle down. Want to come along? Ain't excitin' like a gold strike, but it's quiet and peaceful, if you like that kind of life."

"That kind of life would suit me mighty good," Lowery answered with a catch in his voice. "If you think you could trust me."

"I think you've decided which is your road," the old man said, "and I'll bet a pinto you stay on it. Well, let's get goin'."

Keno watched them move down the road, and as they topped the rise, he raised his hand in a friendly salute, then went about loading Dodge's body onto his horse.

Make Good or—

Limpy lets his relaxed legs turn to water and flops onto the boardwalk

Make Trouble!

Like a snowball rolling downhill, the rumor of a rampant killer gathers momentum till it ends in flaming gunsmoke!

By RICHARD BRISTER

YOU take a man with a vivid imagination—he'll either make good or make trouble. Limpy Longnecker was a man with the kind of imagination that got him into a good deal of trouble. He come up to Bartle City after late round-up down on the Circle S with rheumatiz in his leg, two hundred and thirty-eight dollars of winterin' money in his Levis pocket, and a twinkle in his eye that said he was out for a frolic.

His stummick wasn't used to the rot-gut, him havin' been out on the range. He took aboard a little more than he knowed how to handle, then that vivid imagination of Limpy's commenced to toy with the notion of gettin' into a poker game, and buildin' his two hundred thirty-eight up to a real good-time stake.

He set in with some local sharpers, and in the course of two hours he'd lost every red cent, in addition to his silver spurs, his horse, and his California saddle. Feller that won the most of it never even set Limpy up to a consolation drink.

Limpy went out on Gooseneck Street and set on the plank walk, with his boot-

heels in the gutter, getting soberer every minute.

Old Gramp Altshuler, who'd as soon talk as eat, set alongside of Limpy, and set out to console him.

"Well, son," says Gramp, "it looks to be a mighty dull winter for you. 'Course, you got friends who'll stake yuh to eatin' and sleepin' money. You'll skin through the winter all right, I reckon."

"Once," says Limpy, "I spent two solid months snowed in at a Circle S line camp. All alone I was, mind you. Didn't have a book to read, nor a deck of cards to play solitary. That looked to be a mighty dull time too, Gramp."

"Um," says Gramp Altshuler.

" 'T wasn't, though," says Limpy.

"How come 'twasn't?" says Gramp.

"Why," says Limpy, "I amused myself, imaginin' things."

"Hey?" says Gramp, hoisting his snow-white eyebrows some. "What kind of things?"

"All kinds of things," says Limpy, bragging some now that he's got Gramp's attention hooked onto the line of his thought. "Way I look at it, Gramp, they's two sides to this life. The outside life that a man lives in a world of streets, people, hosses, and such like. And the inside life, that he lives in his head."

THE old man looks at him with a funny glint in his eye. "I never hear such fool talk, Limpy Longnecker. Where'd yuh come by such hifalutin' ideas?"

"A man," goes on Limpy, unruffled, "that can live an active life in his head, don't never have to be bored. He can set still as a statue and have a high ol' time."

"Hah!" says Gramp.

"The trick," says Limpy, "is havin' a active imagination."

"Seems to me," says Gramp, "yore imagination is gonna have its work cut out for it, Limpy, commencin' right now. 'Cause you shore ain't in no financial shape to buy yoreself any fun or excitement. What you grinnin' so for, boy? Ain't you got brains enough to be put out about losin' yore hoss and saddle and winterin' money?"

"I'm enjoyin' myself," says Limpy, still grinning. "I just come on a notion that oughtta be good for a laugh. And it won't cost a nickel."

"What you gettin' at, boy?" says Gramp, kind of mean. "I swear, if you ain't the doggonedest one for gettin' a man's curiosity a-goin'."

"Why," says Limpy, "you was speakin' about fun and excitement, and that got my brain goin'. This here town is dead as a doornail, says I to me, and what's goin' to bring her to life with a bang?"

"What?" says Gramp.

"A badman," says Limpy.

"A badman!" snorts Gramp. "Son, are you a plain idiot? There ain't been a gunslick worth throwin' a posse at around these parts for five years. Not since they run Bart McLaughlin up a box canyon and shot him as full of holes as a hunk of cheese."

"That's just this town's trouble. Bartle City could stand a visit from a first-class badman. Might wake her up some and pump some life in her."

"Son, I ain't a-goin' to set here and listen to such fool nonsense. Assumin' they was ary sense to what you been sayin', where yuh goin' to get this badman that's needed to pump some life in Bartle City?"

"Easy," says Limpy. "Out of my head."

"Out of yore head," Gramp repeats, kind of slow and disgusted. "Son, I swear, if I hadn't known yore daddy almost like a brother, I'd throw up my cards on yuh. What in Sam Hill are yuh tryin' to get at, for tarnation?"

"Gramp," says Limpy, warming up to his idea, "I got an idea that appears to have a tolerable few laughs into it. Can yuh keep it mum, if I was to leave yuh in on it?"

"I ain't no gabber, boy. You know that."

Limpy doesn't know any such a thing, but he says, "Gramp, just you keep yore eyes and ears open, the next few hours. Mabbe you'll see what I mean, about imagination."

And so saying, he walks off down Gooseneck, leaving the old man to stand there and shake his head from one side to the other, mumbling, "That boy ain't got a particle of common sense to him."

Limpy walks down past the Double Dollar saloon, and the Pothook Restaurant, and Breen's Hardware, with one brown, calloused hand stuck in his empty levis pocket. He looks up Slade Street, where Jesse Gaulden's honky-tonk sets, back off the walk some. There is some

right good lookers up to Jesse's place—girls that would be glad to fill in some of Limpy's lonely hours this coming winter, if he still had his two hundred and thirty-eight dollars.

"Well," says Limpy to himself, "I ain't got it. So they ain't no use crying about it. I reckon I'll just have to pass up the ladies this winter."

It makes a mighty glum prospect, but Limpy starts to think of his talk with Gramp Altshuler, and a big grin comes back to his weathered features, just as natural as moo comes out of a cow's mouth.

LIMPY LONGNECKER walks across Gooseneck Street and through the batwings of the Seven Up Saloon, where he runs smack dab into Tom Benzer, who he'd once rode with, back in his days with the Horse Collar outfit down toward Texas.

"Well dog me," says Tom, "if this ain't a lucky stroke! Limpy, you and me are celebratin'. Step up and have yoreself a horn."

"Fact is," says Limpy, real sober, "I ain't drinkin'." There's no real need for him and Tom to celebrate, inasmuch as they seen each other in Sage only three weeks ago. In addition to which, Limpy never drinks on a man when he ain't in financial shape to return the treat. "I—uh—my stummick ain't doing me so good here lately, Tom."

"That never used to stop you from drinkin'," says Tom, suspicious.

"Mebbe it should have," counters Limpy, quick as a whip. "'Pears like I've got the dyspepsy."

"Why, that's a doggone shame," says Tom.

"Oh, I ain't in no pain," says Limpy. "Fact is," he goes on, kind of confidential, "this ain't such a good time for a man with a gun on his hip to be gettin' slopped up."

"That so?" says Tom. "Meanin'—"

"You ever hear of Bart McLaughlin?" says Limpy, real sober.

"McLaughlin?" says Tom. "You joshing me, Limpy? Everybody's heard of Bart McLaughlin. Why I rode on the posse that settled McLaughlin's hash for him. What about him?"

"His brother's in town."

"His brother?" gulps Tom.

"Bat," says Limpy, deadpanned.

"Bat McLaughlin," says Tom. "Why, I never even knowed Bart had a brother. Where's he at?"

"All I know for shore," says Limpy, "is he's in town. One of these strangers that's drifted in the past couple days. Workin' under an alias, and at that I don't guess you can blame him for not advertisin' hisself in the town that done in his big brother."

"Bat McLaughin," says Tom, and now ears are commencing to prick up along the mahogany bar. "Bart's brother. Where'd you hear about this, Limpy?"

"They was talking about it down at the hotel."

"Yuh don't suppose he's here with some fool idea of getting vengeance for what happened to Bart?"

"What else?" shrugs Limpy.

"He shore took his good time. It's five years since—"

"Way I heard it," says Limpy, "Bat's been rottin' in jail somewheres. They've just turned him loose, and he made a beeline."

"Why, blazes," says Tom, "that's pretty bad. I suppose, bein' another of them ornery McLaughlin's, he's gun handy?"

"Even slicker than Bart," says Limpy, "accordin' to the talk goin' around."

"That's goin' to mean trouble," says Tom, real sober now.

"What?" says the man next to him down the bar.

"McLaughin," says Tom. "He's in town."

"McLaughlin's dead," snorts the other.

"Bart is," says Tom. "Not Bat, though. He's right here in town, and—"

"Tom" says Limpy, grabbing hold of his middle and bending over forward some, "you'll have to excuse me. That blamed dyspepsy is kickin' up a fuss in my stummick again. I better go see Doc Bainbridge."

"Why, just you go ahead, son," says Tom, and turns to the man down the bar. "Like I was sayin', it's Bart's younger brother. According to the boys down by the hotel, he's been a-festering in jail all these years, just a-dreaming of the time they'd turn him out, so he could come back and knock off some of the boys that rode out after Bart. 'Pears like we're due for a little excitement."

"Bat McLaughlin," muses the other. "Now you mention it, seems like I heard about him. Real mean-lookin' devil.

Greased lightning when it comes to haulin' out hardware. Cut a man down as quick as say, 'Howdy?' "

Limpy goes along down street to the Pothook, and puts on the feedbag, telling proprietor Sam Besselink he means to pay up later, when the Circle S rides in and he can borry eatin' money off of some of his saddle pards.

Later on, he ambles down Gooseneck Street to the Seven Up, and goes inside, finding Gramp Altshuler inside with Ted Hoskins, up to his ears in a hot game of checkers.

Limpy kibitzes some, then old Gramp looks up at him, dead sober.

"You heard the news?" Gramp says.

"What?" Limpy asks him.

"They's a badman in town. Bart McLaughlin's brother. Name of Black Bat. Done ten, twelve years up in Kitanning. Come in on the sly to shoot up the men that done for Bart."

"No!" says Limpy.

"Yes," says Gramp, grinning in back of his withered hand, and just winking at Limpy a fraction.

"You shore," grins Limpy, "it ain't just somebody's imagination?"

RIGHT about then is when the ruckus commences, down to the other end of the room. Appears like Alf Williston had jogged the arm of a thin, mean-eyed little stranger, and caused him to spill his whisky just as he was lifting it toward his mouth. Whisky spilt down all over the shirt front of this dark stranger, and he throwed it up to Alf real proddy.

"What'sa matter, you clumsy idiot?" He sets his glass on the bar, and lets his hand hover over his gun-butt. He lets his eyes drop toward his boots, which have caught their share of that spilt likker. "Wipe them boots off!" he snaps.

Alf Williston has got a long streak of mule in him. He's scared some, but he don't budge a fraction."

"You hear me tell you to wipe them boots off?" snarls the stranger.

"I heard you," says Alf, getting mighty hot in the neck now.

"Get going!" says the stranger.

"Wipe 'em yoreself," Alf says, and that's the cue for the stranger to go into action.

He makes a pass at his gun, fast as lightning. Alf realizes it's a case of shoot or get shot, and goes after his own gun. It is only then that the scrambling crowd realizes the stranger's first grab at his gun was just a fake grab, to get Alf going.

Alf's gun is pretty near clear of leather when the stranger's hand goes for his hardware in earnest. You never see anything to match the speed he shows, yanking that six out. Alf looks like they's an anchor tied on his arm, alongside of that stranger. "Boom!" goes the stranger's gun, "Thump!" goes Alf against the sawdust-covered floorboards, and the stranger is standing there, cool as cucumbers, blowing smoke out of his barrel.

The hole through Alf is right through the head, and they ain't a particle of question about his next port of call. He's a customer for our Boot Hill.

Nobody says anything to the stranger. Nobody even coughs out loud, until Marshal Ed Kendricks barges in from his office, two doors north on Gooseneck. "What happened?" says Ed, who ain't overly bright. Then his eye falls on what's left of Alf. "Who done that?"

"Me," says the stranger, shrugging some.

Marshal Ed looks at Stoney Fox, the bartender. "How'd it happen, Stoney?"

The stranger answers that question. "He bumped into me and made me spill booze all over myself. I called him for it and we shot it out. I shot him in self defense. His gun was out first."

"Seems to me," suggests Marshal Ed, "I never heard but one shot, friend. You must be fast."

"I am," says the stranger. "Plenty fast, Marshal."

Marshal Ed looks at him. "Don't recollect seein' you anywheres till now, stranger. You got a name?"

"McLaughlin," says the mean-looking killer. "Bat McLaughlin." And you can hear them Adam's apples a-bobbling, all over the room.

Limpy Longnecker's Adam's apple is bobbling harder than anyone else's. Gramp Altshuler's is running Limpy's a mighty close second. The old man leans over and whispers in Limpy's ear, mighty baffled, "Son, I got to take my hat off to you."

"So?" mumbles Limpy.

"From now on," whispers Gramp, "I'll have a healthy respect for the power of your imagination, boy."

"Mmm-hmmmm," says Limpy. He is

staring across the room at this Bat McLaughlin, plumb flabbergasted, wondering if he is dreaming all this. There ain't no Bat McLaughlin, as Limpy knows of, yet there he stands, in the flesh, across the room there, exchanging insults with Marshal Ed Kendricks.

"This place," the local lawdog is saying, "ain't no shooting gallery, McLaughlin. I got a good mind to run you in."

"You got nothing to hold me for, Marshal. It was plain self defense. Plenty here saw it. I'm clean. I just come out of jail, and the law don't want me for nothing."

BAT McLAUGHLIN, if that is his name, grins real arrogant at the marshal, pops his six-gun back in his holster, steps over Alf Williston's dead body, and walks through the batwings.

Limpy Longnecker watches him go as if he is watching a ghost. Gramp Altshuler gets up from his checker game with Ted Hoskins, and leads Limpy off to one side, where they can converse private.

"Son, I ain't got a particle of an idea what you're up to. All I know is you claimed you was going to whip up a bad-man out of yore imagination, and dogged if you ain't shorely done it. Beats me how yuh managed to make good on that promise, but I won't plague yuh with questions. All I'm sayin' is if yuh brought him into town, it's yore duty to get rid of him. Pronto."

"Gramp, I ain't got no more idea where that fella come from than you have. I swear it. I— What're you lookin' at me like that for?"

"Son, it may not have struck you yet, but it just so happens that Alf Williston was one of the boys that rode out to get Bart McLauglin. Yuh see what that means?"

"Huh?"

"Bat's here to pay off that old debt in blood. He'll find a bone to pick with Ed next, if I know how his mind works. After all, Ed led that posse. And Ed don't stand a chance in China against this feller's gun speed. Son, it's up to you."

"Now wait a minute," says Limpy, commencing to sweat right proper. "I never had nothing to do with— Well, all right, I'll admit I done some talkin' around, but I was just trying to pull off a kind of whizzer on the town, Gramp. I invented this feller, out of my imagination, like I bragged I could do. But you could of knocked me upside down with a feather when he come to life. I was the most surprised man in this saloon, when he give his name to Marshal Ed."

"That don't signify," says Gramp. "Whether you invented the feller, or had him sent for, the fact remains he's a killer. One man's dead already, on account of yore imagination, and it's up to you to make shore nobody else dies account of it."

"You ain't a-goin' to corral me with that kind of talk," says Limpy, wiping the back of a hand acrost his wet forehead.

"I notice yore gun was the one thing you hung onto while you was poker-playin'," says Gramp. "Boy, you got to use that six-shooter. On Bat McLaughlin."

"Doggone it, Gramp, there ain't no Bat McLaughlin, I tell yuh."

"I s'pose," says Gramp, wavin' a hand at what's on the floor, "that ain't even Alf Williston's dead body a-layin' there in the sawdust, waitin' for Doc Bainbridge to come fetch him. Son, I'll lay my cards face up for yuh. You either go gunning for Bat McLaughlin, afore he finds some handy excuse to cut the marshal to ribbons, or I spill the beans."

"What beans?" says Limpy.

"Mebbe you'd stand to have a real pleasant winter in town," suggests Gramp, "was I to spill it that Bat McLaughlin's comin' to Bartle City was yore personal doin's. I'd think on that, son. I'd shorely think on it."

And the old man turns his back and walks away, stiff as a beanpole, leaving Limpy to scratch his chin bristles and wonder how in sin he got himself in such a fix so blame sudden.

"Somethin' mighty queer goin' on around here," he says under his breath. "Mighty queer. Yes, siree. But Gramp ain't putting me over no barrel. I still say it ain't no part of my problem."

JUST tellin' himself that makes him feel better, and he goes out on Gooseneck Street, just in time to see Bat McLaughlin coming out of the hardware with old Breen. McLaughlin points at an expensive, hand-tooled gun-belt in Breen's window, and says:

"I'll take that. Get it pronto."

Breen is all smiles. "Yes, sir, that's a fine piece of merchandize, Mr. McLaughlin. You have very good taste. That's a steal at the price."

"Never mind about the price," says Black Bat McLaughlin. "I wasn't fixing to pay cash."

"Y-you—"

"I figure," says Bat, "you'd see yore way to let me have it on credit, Breen." He don't exactly go for his gun, but the tone of his voice is a threat, and them small eyes are glinting in a way that throws plenty of scare into Breen.

He nods, kind of green in the gills. Then he gets the belt out of the display window, and hands it over.

McLaughlin puts it on, smiling some, then goes into the Pothook Restaurant. Limpy hangs around across the street, where he can watch McLaughlin arguin' with Sam Besselink through the restaurant window. It ain't hard to see McLaughlin is establishin' some more "credit" for himself, in the Pothook.

Limpy hears somebody comin' up the walk, and turns to see Gramp Altshuler. "See what his game is?" says Gramp. "Makin' hisself as undesirable as he knows how to be, so Marshal Ed Kendricks'll have to order him outta town."

"You old buzzard," says Limpy. "You don't miss much, do you?"

"He'll kill the marshal," says Gramp. "Ed ain't no slouch in a gunfight, but this feller'll make a sitting duck of him. You'd stand more chance ag'in' him, son. And it's yore bounden duty to—"

"You come offa that, Gramp. I'll be my own conscience, and I'll see my own duty, when the time comes."

"You're lookin' kind of wild-eyed, boy. Chickens come home to roost, have they? Throwed a boomerang and she's curlin' right back where she started out from."

"Aw—"

"Going to let the marshal fight yore battle, hey?"

"Doggone you, Gramp, it ain't my battle! I blowed in here yesterday with seven months of hard work behind me, looking forward to a good time, plenty of wine, wimmen and song this winter. 'Pears like the fates wasn't minded thataway. But danged if I get bam-boozled into a gunfight on yore say-so."

"You thought him up to begin with," says Gramp, disgusted. "Mebbe you can think him out of town, son." And he walks away.

Limpy can see old Breen hobbling down toward Marshal Ed Kendricks' office. Pretty soon the marshal comes out, loosening his forty-fives in their holsters, and makes his way up street toward the Pothook.

It sure looks like Bat McLaughlin's bait has drawed game, and Limpy stands there, watching careful, but plenty relieved. If he could see that this was really his battle, he would have cut himself in. But Gramp's talk only has turned Limpy stubborn, and he stands there telling himself this is Ed Kendricks' proper show, him wearing the law badge in this town and drawing down good pay for it.

Marshal Ed Kendricks ain't overly bright, but he's seen enough gunshot wounds in his time to be properly cautious. He comes up the opposite side of Gooseneck Street from the Pothook, taking his time, trying to figure out his campaign of action. He still hasn't reached the place where Limpy is standing when the batwing doors of the Seven Up Saloon bust open and who spills out on the plank walk, drunk as a tick and shootin' good forty-five slugs at the afternoon sun, but Tom Benzer.

"Yippee," yips Tom, peerin' up and down Gooseneck Street, tryin' to get his eyes adjusted to daylight. "I'm drunker'n a mink, an' spilin' for trouble. I'm plumb saturated." He shoots another slug at the sky. "I hear they's a badman in town," he hollers. "Where's he at? Where's Bat McLaughlin. I mean to shoot me a badman for supper."

OF course this ain't good, because right about then who comes out of the Pothook, looking ornery and mean as a rattler, but the aforesaid Mr. Bat McLaughlin. He stands on the walk, looking up at Tom Benzer with a sneer on his face, while Tom rattles on like an idiot.

"Come back to take care of the men that rode out after Bart, has he? Well, I rode after Bart. And I ain't afraid to admit it. Where's he at? Where's this Bat McLaughlin?"

"Right here," says Bat McLaughlin, real sugary and soft.

"Where?" says Tom, still squinting, account of that bright sunlight he's been aimin' his fool's slugs into. It is plain to see he can't even make out Bat McLaughlin's figure, down the walk there

in front of the Pothook.

It is also plain that Bat McLaughlin will haul out hardware, and kill Tom Benzer, in another moment. This gives Limpy Longnecker a terrible sensation in the pit of his stummick, and not from dyspepsia. Tom Benzer is a saddle pard from the old days with the Horse Collar outfit—a man Limpy has been drunk with.

Also it occurs to Limpy that Tom wouldn't of got himself in such a fool fix, except for the parcel of lies Limpy told him earlier in the day.

"Well," says Limpy to himself, "'pears like it's my duty."

He loosens his gun in its holster, runs across the street, and pulls up short in front of Tom Benzer, standin' right between his drunken saddle pard and the killer.

"Sidle off," says McLaughlin, and waves a hand at him.

"Not me," says Limpy.

"I'm counting three," says McLaughlin.

"Count 'em out nice an' loud," says Limpy.

"One," says McLaughlin.

Limpy stands there, relaxed, but wary.

"Two."

Still Limpy don't move. It is kind of awesome, throwin' the showdown count at a man who refuses to crack. McLaughlin's eyes narrow some, and fear lights up in them. He makes his stab for hardware a split second before he throws that big "Three!"

The man is fast, no getting around it. His gun comes up spitting lead long before Limpy, who is playing it straight, can punch a shot out.

Limpy does the only thing he can, against such rattlesnake tactics. He lets them relaxed legs of his turn to water, and flops onto the boardwalk, quick as a dropped rock. Chances are he couldn't never of got down so quick, if he'd of been tensed up, and had to unlock his legs at the knee joints.

That first slug of McLaughlin's goes a-whistling a funeral song, plumb through the spot where Limpy by rights should of been standing. It nudges his Stetson back off his forehead some, but

[*Turn page*]

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that don't affect Limpy's aim, not so you can notice.

He lines up on McLaughlin, squinting along that gun barrel as relaxed as a cat, and squeezes trigger. McLaughlin jerks like one of them dolls on a string. His legs get all tangled up underneath him, and he falls in a heap. The blood is beginning to ooze from the hole in the left side of his shirt front, where Limpy's slug took him.

Marshal Ed Kendricks has stood like a statue through all this, but now he commences to act real important, taking charge of the corpse and so on. He gives McLaughlin a quick search, and comes on a nude woman tattoo on the dead gunman's left arm, up near the shoulder.

"Sa-ay," he says, "this ain't any McLaughlin. This is Black Jack Galton. Got a description of him up in my office, mentionin' that tattoo, and likewise offerin' five hundred dollars to the man that delivers him, dead or alive, to the express company."

"Jack Galton," gulps Limpy, who has heard about Galton's reputation. "Don't see why he wanted to masquerade as Bat McLaughlin."

"Mebbe to throw a scare into this town," says the law. "So's he could write his own ticket. Seems like he'd run out of money."

"And mebbe he knowed they wasn't any real Bat McLaughlin," puts in another voice. It is Gramp Altshuler. "So they wasn't no chance of the lie bein' throwed up to him."

"Mebbe," says Limpy, commencing to redden up in the neck some.

Then he remembers what Marshal Ed says about five hundred reward money. He thinks what five hundred'll buy, in the way of wine, wimmen and song, this winter, and a big grin slides over his sun-bitten features.

It's just like I was sayin' at the outset. You take a man with a vivid imagination—he'll either make trouble or make good.

Sometimes he'll make both.

THE CHUCK WAGON

(*Continued from page 8*)

Brown, arena director Lynn Beutler, announcer Monte Reger, clowns Wiley McCray and Zeke Bowery, contract performers Buff and Ruby Brady, Zeke and Cele Bowery, and Jean Allen. The rodeo stock was furnished by Beutler Bros.

The final results in saddle bronc riding were: first, Red Wilmer and Freckles Brown, split; third, Sonny Linger; fourth, A. L. South.

Mike Raymond won the bareback riding, Tommy Steiner was second, Red Wilmer was third, Bobby Bruno was fourth Ken Walker was fifth, and sixth was split between Jack Saul and George Aldoff.

W. N. Rice copped the bull riding, Bob Weems was second, Freckles Brown was third, Harvey Taylor and Joe Billings split fourth and fifth and Robert Boyd was sixth. Herschell Romaine was best man in the calf roping, Monroe Tomlinson was second, Pat Lewis was third, and Buddy Derrick was fourth. Bill Agee was tops in steer wrestling, Monroe Tomlinson was second, Roy Ross was third and Earl Moore was fourth.

One of the fastest big program rodeos of the season was the rodeo at Woodward, Okla., when more than a hundred head of stock were used in the contests besides a number of special features, and the whole program run off in three and a half hours.

Red Wilmer won both the bareback and saddle bronc riding events. J. D. Holleyman won the calf roping, G. K. Lewallen won the bull riding, Todd Whatley the steer wrestling, Shorty Matlock the street roping, and Nancy Bragg the cowgirls cloverleaf barrel race.

Trained Horses

Ever since the great horse Jim Key, was featured at the World's Fair in St. Louis in 1904, being one of the first trained or trick horses to attract nation-wide interest, others have been training horses to do various tricks, and most have patterned after the man who handled Jim Key in that they try to conceal the cues by which the horse works.

In the act with the great horse Jim Key, there would be a number of different colored

flags with short handles stuck at intervals of about two feet apart in a rack. People in the audience would be invited to call for a certain color. Whenever a color was called for, the horse's master would command the horse to bring that color.

The horse would step up to the rack and would walk along the rack until he got to the color asked for, or until he received the cue. The audience would marvel at the horse's ability to tell colors, but they would never catch the cue, because they would be looking at the horse and not the trainer.

Most trick horses are trained to do a certain routine, and if that routine is broken into then the animal is more or less up in the air—but now comes Joe Phillips of Flushing, New York, with a horse that he has spent two years in training which he calls "Smoky, the Wonder Horse."

Smoky is a steel gray, a beautiful horse, does any number of tricks, and an expert would have a hard time in catching the cues. Phillips also has Smoky so well trained that he does not follow a routine. He can therefore do any of the tricks in his repertoire, or leave any of them out, and can do a three minute act or a thirty minute act. Joe is lining Smoky up for a lot of television work.

New Mexico State Fair

There was standing room only at five of the eight performances of the rodeo of the New Mexico State Fair at Albuquerque, and a near riot at the front gates one Saturday night when some two thousand were unable to gain admission. The fair board will therefore make the matter of enlargement of the seating capacity for next year's fair and rodeo one of the principal matters to come before the board's first meeting.

Shoate Webster won the calf roping finals, Paul Bond the bareback bronc riding, Casey Tibbs won the saddle bronc riding, Bill Rush the steer wrestling, and Bob Chartier the bull riding.

The posted purses were more than $7,000, which, with the added entrance fees, ran the purses well over ten thousand dollars.

Doings at Ardmore

The first rodeo staged in the big new arena at Ardmore, Oklahoma, was a com-

[*Turn page*]

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plete sellout the entire four days. The show was produced by the World's Championship Rodeo Corporation, Gene Autry and Associates, and Gene was the guest star.

During the last night of the show the new Million Dollar Carter County Free Fair Building was christened the "Gene Autry Building". Everett Colborn, manager of the rodeo corporation and producer of the rodeo, was so well pleased with the attendance that it is assured that the event will be an annual affair in the future.

The final results in bareback bronc riding were: first, Johnny Cobb; second, Mike Raymond; third, Manuel Enos; fourth, Wag Blessing.

Roy Savage won the calf roping, Troy Fort was second, Lex Connelly was third and George Wilderspin was fourth.

Johnny Cobb also copped the saddle bronc riding, Lee Roberts was second, Orville Stanton was third and Wag Blessing fourth. Jack Favor was best man in the steer wrestling, Bill McGuire was second, Whit Keeney was third and Dub Phillips was fourth. Todd Whatley was tops in bull riding, Buttons Yonnick was second, Harry Tompkins was third and Maxie Overstreet was fourth.

Fort Madison Show

The recent Fort Madison, Iowa, Championship Rodeo was again a huge success. It was produced by Everett Colborn, Gene Autry and Associates, while they were on their way up from the Lightning C Ranch at Dublin, Texas, to New York for the Madison Square Garden Rodeo. Fort Madison has long been a stopover for the rodeo train on its way to New York, and last year Everett Colborn arranged for a rodeo during the stopover which was so successful that it was arranged to stage the show again. It drew such good crowds this time that there is now no question about it being an annual show.

Practically all the stock and contract performers later to appear in the World's Championship Rodeo in New York took part in the two-day rodeo, while more than half the great number of contest hands on their way to the big Garden rodeo entered the contests at Fort Madison.

The winners in bareback bronc riding were: First, John Shoulders; Second, Bill Linderman; Third, Wallace Brooks; Fourth, Gail Orr.

Homer Pettigrew won the calf roping,

Dee Burk was second, Lefty Wilken was third and Roy Matthews was fourth.

Casey Tibbs copped the saddle bronc riding, Johnny Cobb was second, Bill Linderman was third and Manuel Enos was fourth. Homer Pettigrew was best man in the steer wrestling, Norman Person was second, Dub Phillips was third and Lex Connelly was fourth. Gerald Roberts and Hubert Dalton tied for first place in the bull riding, Bill Tapp was third and Jim Shoulders was fourth.

News of Rodeo Folks

Fred Alvord, who has been a rodeo arena secretary longer than anyone else in the business, always gives himself the contest number "30." He has been keeping the records of winners of rodeos where he has acted as arena secretary for more than twenty years, and explained that the reason he has always given himself the number 30 is because if his name is not on the insert as arena secretary and shows as number 30, it still tells him that he is the arena secretary. He has saved the programs

[*Turn page*]

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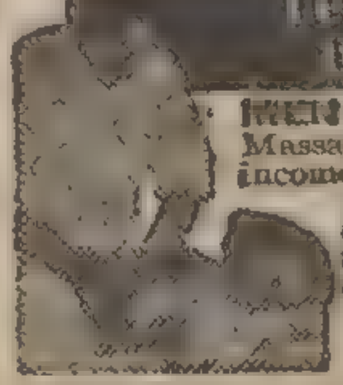

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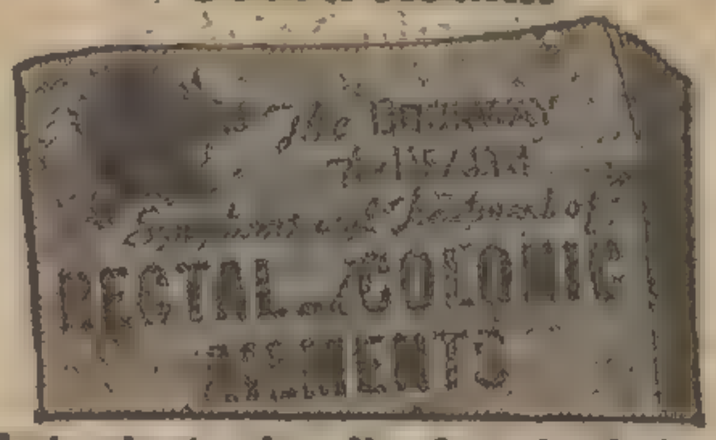

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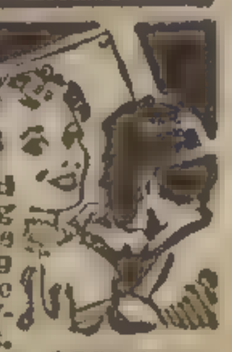

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and insert sheets of hundreds of rodeos, and has saved enough number 30 arm numbers so that if they were pieced together they would make a bedspread.

Tommy Linker, who lived in and around New York City for many years, and always worked around Madison Square Garden during the rodeo, is engaged with the Civil Service Department of the Army, and stationed at Ogden, Utah. Tommy took a vacation during the Madison Square Garden rodeo and returned to New York and worked around Manager Frank Moore's office during the show.

Dorothy Hughes, of Phoenix, Arizona, one of the Ranch Girls who appeared at the Madison Square Garden Rodeo, seems destined to a career in the rodeo arena. She has ridden quite a bit of bucking stock at rodeos during the past year, did quite a bit of trick riding, and even worked as pick-up in the bronc riding. She is a niece of Mildred Mix Morris, former champion cowgirl bronc rider.

The Big Show

Under the master hands of Frank Moore, manager and Everett Colborn, managing director, the 24th Annual Rodeo at Madison Square Garden was one of the most colorful shows ever staged in the Garden.

$84,000.00 in purses, to which the added entrance fees ran the total to more than a hundred thousand dollars, attracted the very best cowboy talent in America, while Everett Colborn corralled one of the greatest strings of rodeo stock ever seen in Gotham and with good stock, top hands, big prizes and proper direction, you just can't have a bad rodeo!

Fourteen events were programmed at each performance, eight of them contests, which included bareback bronc riding, calf roping, mounted basketball, saddle bronc riding, sponsor girls' cloverleaf barrel race, steer wrestling, bull riding and wild horse racing.

The special numbers included the Lightning C Ranch Horseback Quadrille, an old number done in a new, thrilling and colorful manner; Gene Autry, guest star, with Champion and Little Champion, in a very pleasing and colorful number; Ken Boen and his Old Gray Mare, the tops in comedy horse acts.

Gene Autry's second appearance in the arena, with ceremonial dances by Pueblo

Indians, and in a singing number with the Melody Ranch Boys, was especially interesting. The cowgirls were on hand with some fine trick and fancy riding.

Music was furnished by James Cimmeron's Cowboy Band. The judges were Carl Dossey, Everett Bowman and Eddie Curtis. Fred Alvord was the arena secretary, and Ray Lackland and Pete Logan were the announcers. The veteran and favorite clown George Mills was on the job, ably assisted by Andy Womack.

It was a great show and we will report the winners when all the scores are officially confirmed.

Adios! —FOGHORN CLANCY.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

BREATHES there a Western reader with soul so dead, who has never read B. M. Bower's FLYING U stories? Chip of the Flying U, the Little Doctor, the Happy Family, Pink Perkins and all the rest? The long list of Bower books are among the most popular Westerns ever written.

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Pink's name, as you might know, was Percy Cadwallader Perkins. But though he was slight, almost girlish, with yellow curls, there were few men brave enough to call him by his real name. He was dynamite in a small package. Pink he was to everyone and Pink he was called.

Rowdy and Pink were assigned to rounding up stray horses on the Horseshoe Bar ranch. And when, for the tenth time or so they picked up a handsome blue roan, with four brands on him—none the Horseshoe Bar—completely tame, they commenced to be more than suspicious.

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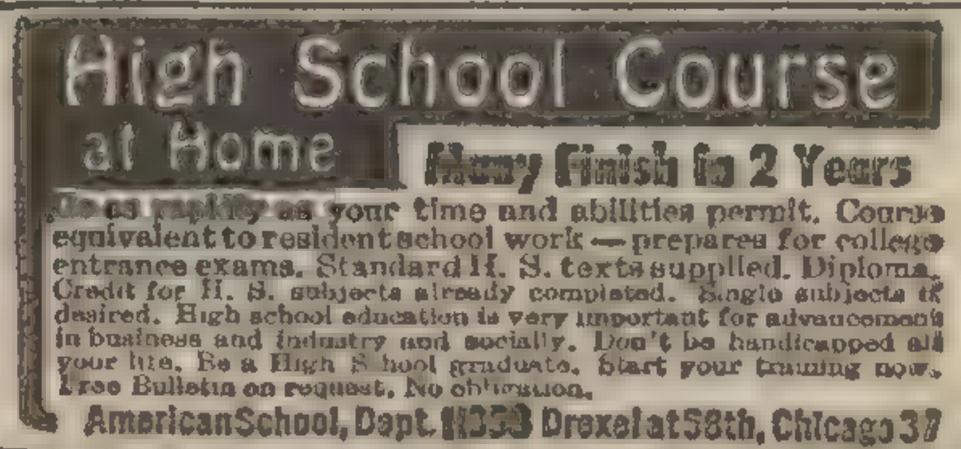
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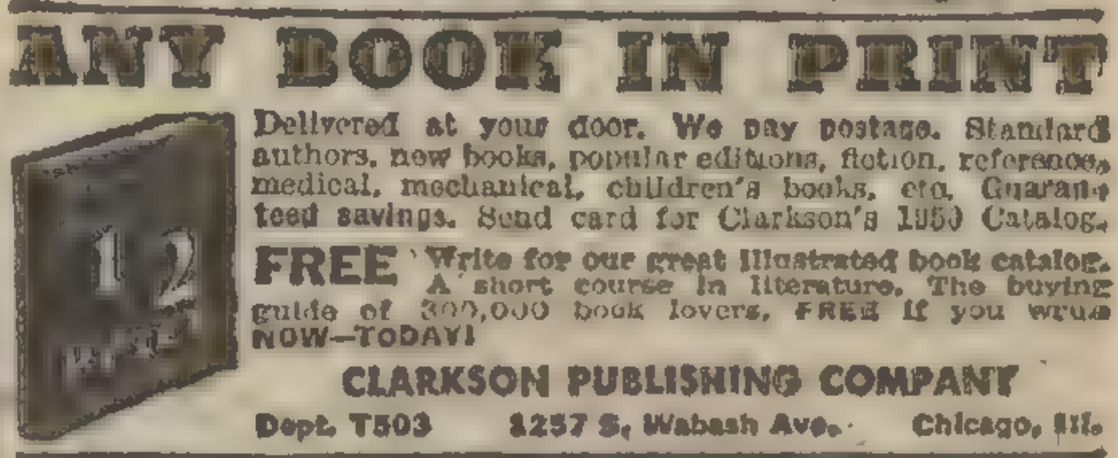
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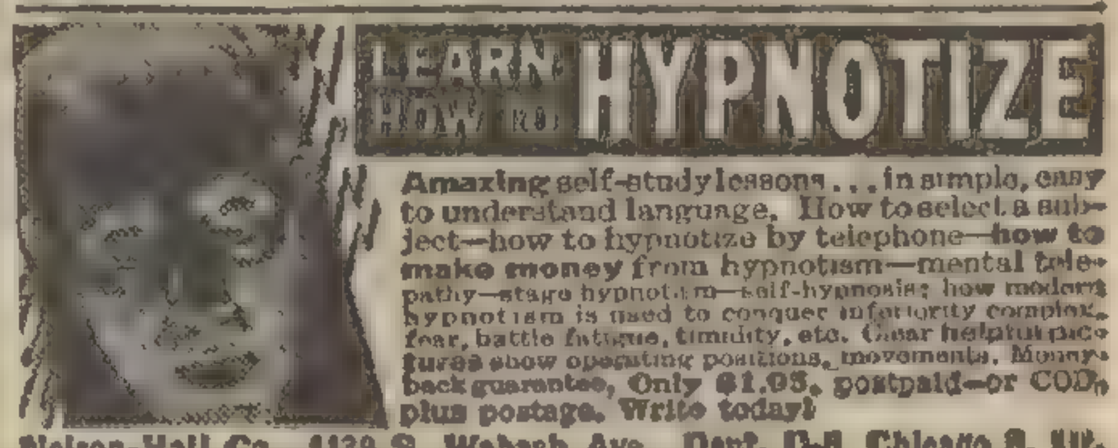
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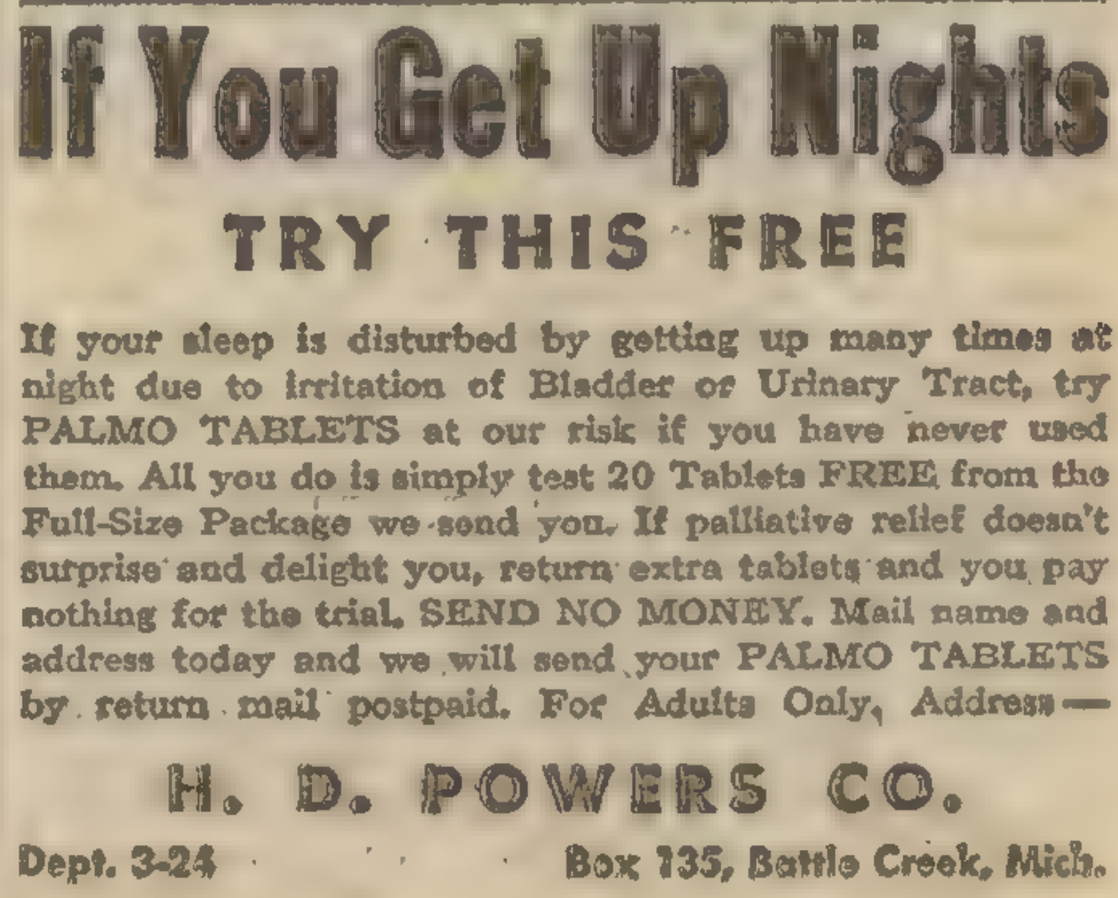
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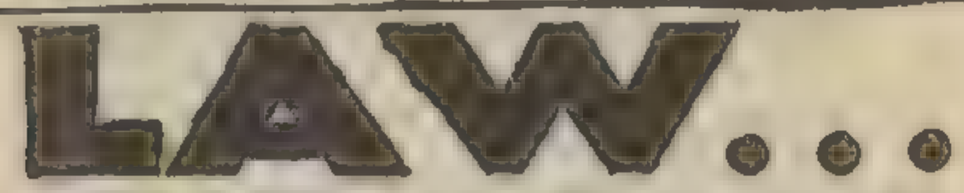

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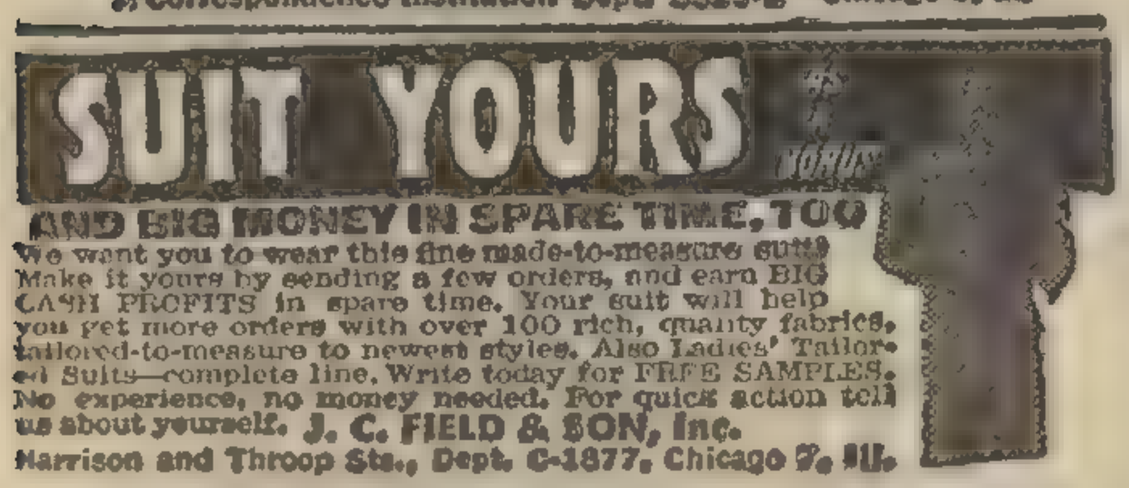
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STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912 AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1933, AND JULY 2, 1946, of West, published bi-monthly at Springfield, Mass., for October 1, 1949, State of New York, County of New York, ss. Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared H. L. Herbert, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of the West, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the acts of March 3, 1933, and July 2, 1946 (section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations), printed on the reverse of this form, to wit: 1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Better Publications, Inc., 10 E. 40th St., New York, N. Y. Editor, G. B. Farnum, 10 E. 40th St., New York, N. Y. Managing Editor, None. Business Manager, H. L. Herbert, 10 E. 40th St., New York, N. Y. 2. That the owner is: Better Publications, Inc., 10 E. 40th St., New York, N. Y.; N. L. Pines, 10 E. 40th St., New York, N. Y. 3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None. 4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him. H. L. Herbert. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 1st day of October, 1949. Eugene Wechsler, Notary Public. (My commission expires March 30, 1950)

too much trouble to take him back to the States. And you know what? The last ten broomtails we ketched here on Horseshoe Bar range came out of the same cup of sugar!"

The idea that they could be working for a bunch of horse rustlers hit both boys hard. They rode in to the ranch and confronted Luke Bridger, range boss of the Horseshoe Bar. They found him in the ranch-house parlor, dividing a huge stack of money among three men, none of whom looked as if they should be carrying that much.

"That's a lot of cash," Rowdy Vaughan said bluntly.

"It's not theirs," Luke Bridger explained. "It's to bet on the rodeo."

Vaughan looked skeptical. He explained the curious happenings of the tame horses. "Either you're buying from the wrong people or we've got horse-catnip growing around our water-holes to encourage stray four-legged visitors. There's another solution, but I'd like you to tell me it ain't so. Which is it, Luke?"

There was a tense moment. Then one of the men made a move. And Pink's high tenor split the air.

"Keep your hand clear of your gun!"

They had their answer. Both boys quit right then and there. They weren't working for any ranch that sold stolen horses. So they rode into Calgary for the rodeo, thinking themselves shut of the Horseshoe Bar.

Nobody could have been wronger. Pink and Rowdy were just beginning their troubles with the horse thieves of that range. And nobody—but nobody—could get into more trouble than Pink and Rowdy.

Here's a story told with all Bower's skill and warmth and human understanding; a story which brings to life the real cowboy and the life of the range as few Western authors could. This is one for your collection—you'll prize your copy of next issue's WEST and you'll keep it. Remember WILD HORSE RANGE, by B. M. Bower!

Along with it we have the latest episode in the zany adventures of those lovable people from Sandstone. COWHIDE MASQUERADE is the title and the author, as you know, is Francis H. Ames.

It seems that an election is coming up in Cannonball County for Justice of the Peace and the competing candidates are Mayor Silver Carson of Sandstone and his arch-

rival, Mayor Flint Tuttle of Gumbo Flats.

The candidates gallop around the county spouting off to beat the cards. "I'll talk Tuttle clean off his pins," declares Silver Carson.

And he'd have done it too, if his false teeth hadn't disappeared. Dirty work from Gumbo Flats! What else could have happened than the Gumbo Flatters had stolen them?

"I votes," says Highpockets Dobbs, "that we prance over to Gumbo Flats and splatters every sidewinder in the place alongside the beak. Then we gathers up all stray teeth that flies out until we gets Carson's back."

This idea is received with enthusiasm, but how to get to Gumbo Flats and peer down the gullets of those lead-slinging hairpins without getting ventilated?

"I got an idee," says Curly Ransome. "All we got to do is get some cowhides with the heads and horns on 'em and dress up as cows! There is all sorts of critters runnin' loose in the streets of Gumbo Flats. A few extra won't be noticed at all."

And so begins what is the wildest, maddest adventure in all Sandstone history. When these weird cows start wandering around in Gumbo Flats, assaulting the citizens and peering into their mouths to see if they have Mayor Carson's teeth on them, the result is something only Ames can describe. You'll howl, you'll scream. Don't say we didn't warn you.

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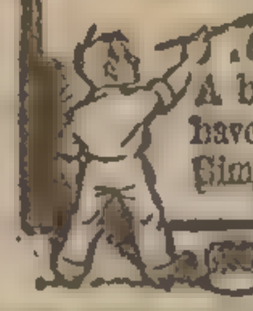

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don't get much chance to go after grizzlies or mountain sheep have been waiting for this one, waterfowl shooting being the important sport it is. Duck shooting, says Mr. Thompson is an American as apple pie. For millions of sportsmen, it is hunting at its best.

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The next issue is rounded out with other short stories and features, a good solid chunk of satisfying reading! Look forward to it!

THE MAIL BAG

SENDING out each new issue of a magazine is like sending a child out into the cruel world and wondering what kind of a reception the critter is going to get. Then your letters come in and sometimes its mighty comforting, for it's the editor's only contact with the folks who read the magazine. Like this:

Just got through reading the January number of WEST and I don't think TIDE OF EMPIRE was near as good as THE LEGEND OF BOBCAT BOB in November. They both had action, but TIDE OF EMPIRE sounded cooked-up—phony, while THE LEGEND OF BOBCAT BOB was as real as the smell of coffee on a frosty morning. Us old cowpunchers can spot the real thing every time. The only thing that saved the January number was MAN RIDING WEST by Jim Mayo. Give us more like that and like THE LEGEND OF BOBCAT BOB.

—Rance Phillips, Helena, Mont.

There's a man speaks his mind. Yep, THE LEGEND OF BOBCAT BOB had a wonderful emotional situation, the kind of pull that gets you right in the heartstrings. That's what made it so real and effective. TIDE OF EMPIRE was a totally different kind of story, part historical—kind of a quick epic flash of the changing West. They appeal differently, but both play a part in the picture.

I am baffled by this Joan McMorran who wrote in your January issue about the Sandstone stories that she was glad Slim got Lulu in A WIFE FOR SLIM because Lulu was a

swell cook. What kind of reason is that for marrying a woman? It would be cheaper to hire her to cook, or to eat in her restaurant every day than to put on the ball and chain. Ain't Joan ever heard of love?

—Sam E. Rascomb, Rego Park, L. I.

Love? Love? Seems like we have heard that word before. But in Sandstone there's no telling what it might be. There are no rules in Sandstone except one—watch your step! Love could be a custard pie in the kisser like as not. And seems to us that at best love is kind of like an unbroken bronc—just when you think you're sitting pretty, up goes the saddle and you go sailing to land in the mud. You sure got to watch your step. Especially in Sandstone.

How about doing a story about Florida's cow country? Down here in central Florida we got more wild west than there is in Texas. More open range, more cowboys, more wild old longhorns—even have more rustling and shooting. Why does it always have to be Texas or Wyoming? What about Florida?

—Raymond S. Boden, Miami, Fla.

Shucks, Ray, we know all about the Flor-

[*Turn page*]

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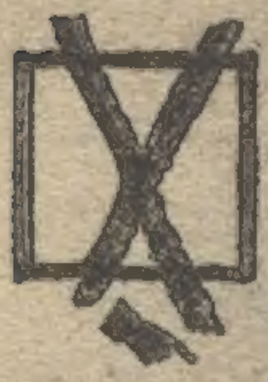

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ida cow country. We been down to Kissimmee and seen the cowboys and visited out to some of those big ranches where they're raising Brahmans to breed up the local stock. And we know those Florida longhorns are the same breed that the Spaniards scattered over the West. But the magazine says WEST and that's what most folks seem to want—the West. If you want to read a dandy book about the Florida cow country, you might try Rex Beach's WILD PASTURES. Meantime, if anybody ever sends us a real good story about the Florida cow country we'll give it some thought. Nobody has yet.

Well, that about uses up our time, *amigos*, so we'll have to be pulling our picket pins and shoving off. Let us hear from you and we don't care whether you got something nice to say or a beef to get off your chest. We still want to hear from you. Make it a letter or a postcard and just address it to The Editor, WEST, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. So long, and thanks, folks!

—THE EDITOR.

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If one really knows a man or a race prejudices vanish. Charles Lamb once put his finger on this truth. Somebody wanted to introduce him to a man he did not like. Lamb said he did not want to meet him because if he knew the man he would begin to like him.

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